FIVE NOVELS BY ALBERTO MORAVIA

Mistaken Ambitions
Agostino
Luca
Conjugal Love
A Ghost at Noon

With an Introduction by

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INTRODUCTION

1

In the past five years, Alberto Moravia has established himself as an international literary figure of the first rank. When *Time* magazine referred to him as "one of the best writers in the world today," it was voicing an opinion shared by a number of critics on both sides of the Atlantic. Moravia's work has had a wide international appeal. His books have been translated into some twenty languages; and in the United States, his total sales have greatly exceeded those of any other Italian novelist, living or dead.

In Moravia's fiction there is an unusual fusion of the somber modern temper with an old-fashioned respect for storytelling. His long novels—*Mistaken Ambitions,** *The Woman of Rome, The Conformist*—are strongly charged with action; and even when Moravia is anatomizing a neurosis and describing every shift in its pulse, as in the novelette *Luca,* he is careful to sustain narrative interest: there is suspense in his psychology. His artistry reaches its peak in the short novel; in the longer novels, the plotting, especially in the later stages, is sometimes contrived or crudely melodramatic.

At his best, Moravia is a superlative craftsman. He admires classical tragedy above all other literary forms, and one finds its tautness and its elegance of design in his work. His prose — firm, in the main humorless, but strong on clarity and precision — has the beauty of writing which expresses unerringly what its author wishes to express. His milieu is for the most part Italian bourgeois society; and he has documented it sharply and solidly without indulging in the naturalistic writer's plodding accumulation of detail. In quick, easy strokes he conjures up the leisurely and monotonous rhythm of the long summer vacation at the seaside; the inert atmosphere that hovers over the dining table as the family is consuming its copious midday meal; the furnishings, banal but "of good quality"; the small talk, the entrenched habits, and the conventional values.

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* This is the title which Moravia prefers for *Le Ambizioni Sbagliate,* first published in English as *The Wheel of Fortune.*

But where Moravia excels above all is in the depth and subtlety of his psychological insight; in his ability to disclose the hidden vagaries of human nature without flattening his characters into case histories. Few writers have displayed such mastery in treating the crises of adolescence; and there is possibly no one else today who handles the domain of sexual experience with Moravia's acuteness and matter-of-fact exactitude.

The present anthology offers American readers a large and representative selection of Moravia's work. It contains, among other things, one of his early novels, *Mistaken Ambitions,* hitherto out of print; his very latest novel, *A Ghost at Noon;* and a novelette which many critics consider to be Moravia's masterpiece, *Agostino.*

2

Alberto Moravia was born in Rome in 1907, the son of a moderately wealthy Venetian architect. Stricken by tuberculosis of the bone at the age of nine, he spent five of the next eight years in bed, the last two in a sanatorium in the Dolomites. The disease was not fully conquered until Moravia was twenty-five, and it has left him with a slight limp.

Moravia's first novel, *Gli Indifferenti,* was completed before he was twenty, but no publisher would accept it until the author had agreed to pay for the first printing. The book was a sensational success: at twenty-two Moravia found himself famous —and in official quarters infamous. Although *Gli Indifferenti* contained no reference whatsoever to politics, its acrid picture of the Italian bourgeoisie was in flagrant contradiction to Fascist mythology. The novel focuses on the disintegration of a Roman family in the late nineteen-twenties. The lives of its protagonists are rotted by false emotionalism, inertia, and illusory hopes; and the implicit theme is that there is no escape from this condition in the time in which they live. With its deft construction and its assured, merciless characterization, this furiously disillusioned book is an amazing accomplishment on the part of an author not yet twenty.

When Moravia's second novel, *Le Ambizioni Sbagliate* (*Mistaken Ambitions*) was published in Italy in 1935, the censors issued a directive that it was not to be reviewed. *Mistaken Ambitions* — a big, intricately plotted book with a steadily mounting charge of tension — revolves around the passions and intrigues of two Roman families of the upper and middle class. The principal protagonists are a young journalist who considers himself a man of high principles but fails to measure up to them; a wealthy *marchesa* whose husband has taken a mistress and who is determined to revenge herself; and a voluptuous-looking courtesan, cold and ruthless, whose ruling obsession is to marry into the aristocracy. Its title perfectly sums up the theme.

Finding the political atmosphere in Italy suffocating, Moravia traveled a great deal during the thirties writing nonpolitical reportage for Italian newspapers. Most of 1935 he spent in the United States and in Mexico, which suggested the backdrop of his next novel, *La Mascherata* (*The Fancy Dress Party*). The novel's reference to Mussolini's love life was so transparent that each of the underlings in the censorship department felt he had better hand the book on to his superior; and eventually it reached the Minister of Popular Culture, who handed it to Mussolini. The Duce ordered that the novel be published. A month later, it was ordered withdrawn. Moravia was then forbidden to write in the press under his own name and he adopted the pseudonym of Pseudo. A year later, Pseudo was silenced.

During the forty-five-day Badoglio interregnum which followed the fall of Fascism, Moravia became involved in anti-Fascist journalism; and when the Germans occupied Rome, he learned that the SS intended to arrest him. He and his wife, whom he had married in 1941, fled to the battle front in the Cassino area, expecting that within a few weeks they would fall into the hands of the Allies. The weeks lengthened into eight months, during which the Moravias lived like savages in a mud hut 3000 feet up in the mountains.

Since his liberation by the American Fifth Army in May, 1943, Moravia has been extraordinarily productive. He has published eight books in Italy, bringing his total up to fifteen. He has written the script for the film version of two of his books, one of them *The Woman of Rome,* whose heroine is portrayed by Gina Lollobrigida. He has had a play produced in Milan and has recently completed another drama. In addition, he has turned out a great deal of journalism and has acted as adviser to an Italian publisher on American and British books.

Moravia writes two or three hours every morning, seven days a week, wherever he may be. "I can write," he once remarked, "in a hotel lobby or with someone playing the bull fiddle in the chair near me." In the afternoon and evenings, he follows his fancy; he reads, walks, goes swimming when at the seaside, or sees his intimate friends. He is a firm believer in the Greek ideal of the well-rounded life—"My books are part of my life, but are not so over-proportionately, and all my strength has gone into maintaining a sense of proportion."

I first met Moravia in 1947 in Anacapri, where he lived for four years. Just above medium height and compactly built, he is a handsome man who bears a slight resemblance to Sir Laurence Olivier. His dark hair is graying at the temples, and there is a suggestion of severity in his square-cut, strongly modeled face, with its long thin-lipped mouth and deep-set eyes. Though essentially shy, Moravia emerges fairly readily from his shell, and he is an extremely stimulating talker. The predominant impression is of immense intelligence and controlled restlessness; of a man — to quote his friend, Robert Penn Warren — "strangely poised between the inward and the outward worlds, [whose vigor] turns inward in brooding and self-absorption, outward in curiosity, argument, joke and abrupt gesture."

3

After *The Fancy Dress Party,* Moravia wrote two novelettes which were published in the United States in a single volume entitled *Two Adolescents: The Stories of Agostino and Luca.* In contrast to so many American and British novels of adolescence, which bog down in autobiographical self-pity and nostalgia for the lost paradise of childhood, these stories are told with the clear-eyed detachment of a mature adult and with an unobtrusive but telling compassion. The anguish of the youthful protagonists is revealed in all its pathos, but without the slightest trace of mawkishness.

Set against an exquisitely evocative background of summer sunshine and sea, *Agostino* chronicles — with an extraordinary delicacy of perception — a sheltered thirteen-year-old's loss of innocence and the inner dramas that ensue. It is a small masterpiece which to my mind ranks with Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice. Luca* is the story of a neurotic fifteen-year-old who, after working himself up to a total breakdown, is "reborn" through his initiation into sexual experience by a warmhearted nurse. Though less attractive than *Agostino* and not so perfectly proportioned, it is no less impressive in its insight and its control of the trickiest possible subject matter.

In Moravia's next novel, *The Woman of Rome,* the prostitute-heroine and narrator, Adriana, is a beautiful, courageous girl, brought up in atrocious poverty but sustained by a cheerful disposition in which there is a blend of intense sensuality, natural goodness, and hopeful longing for a decent husband and a nice home. The two men who complete her ruin are a brutal murderer, Sonzogno, who possesses her physically more deeply than any other man and leaves her bearing his child; and Mino, a neurotic intellectual with whom she falls desperately in love because his family background embodies her idea of the good life. Adriana, in the early stages of the novel, represents the primitive Italy, uncontaminated by civilization, and Sonzogno and Mino symbolize the factors that led Italy to disaster under Fascism—the appeal of force and the unfortunate role played by the intelligentsia.

As a piece of fiction, *The Woman of Rome* is easy to poke fun at, since taken literally it is literally all about whoring; and its heroine, as disaster closes in on her, indulges in philosophic musings in which *vox populi* sometimes sounds incongruously like the *vox* of Existentialism. But there is much in *The Woman of Rome* in which Moravia's special talents show up brilliantly—his narrative power; his skill in projecting the "feel" of Italian life; his mastery in the domain of Eros.

In order to appreciate Moravia one must be of the persuasion that sex is a proper subject for the novelist. Those who feel that the full-dress adulteries of Victorian fiction, or the fancy-dress amours of the historical romance, carry realism in sexual relations about as far as it should go will unquestionably find Moravia outrageously lacking in restraint. He displays in his fiction an unusually vibrant awareness of the erotic element in life; but his sexuality is spontaneous and forthright, free from any taint of calculated sensationalism. Just as Balzac's work derived substance from his preoccupation with "the truth of money," so Moravia's work gains force and individuality from his preoccupation with "the truth of sex."

To Moravia, as to many Italians, sex is the natural passion and pastime of mankind, and nothing pertaining to it startles or embarrasses him. I well remember his sardonic amusement over the hoopla occasioned in this country by the first Kinsey report. "An ignorant Italian peasant," he said, "knows all these things before he is twenty."

But there is a more specific reason, I believe, why sex occupies the center of Moravia's stage. Like Thomas Mann or the early Aldous Huxley, Moravia is a dualist deeply conscious of a conflict between "civilization" and "nature," intellect and instinct. Though pre-eminently an intellectual, Moravia is also a man of the Mediterranean who loves "the ocean, the mountains, strong sunlight and wine"; a man who is profoundly attracted by the Homeric age, which he sees as the "unspoiled" infancy of civilization, when civilization was still developing in accordance with and not contrary to nature. Moravia most certainly is no archaist yearning for a reversion to the past, but he feels that the highly civilized modern has suffered a damaging severance from instinctual nature, which is neither "good" nor "bad" but which cannot be violated without violating life itself. Thus if sex figures so prominently in Moravia's work, it is, I think, because it represents to him the great line of communication between the cerebral modern and elemental nature. To vary the metaphor, it appears as the prompting of Mother Earth; as a great female force which reminds man of the truth of his origins.

4

The three novels which followed *The Woman of Rome* are further studies of the price which modern civilization exacts; and in two of them, the problem is dramatized in terms of an intellectual man married to a deeply instinctual woman. The narrator of *Conjugal Love,* Silvio Baldeschi, is a wealthy dilettante whose recent marriage has proved profoundly satisfying. Baldeschi reveres instinct as the life-giving force in love and art; his wife, Leda, wishes she had more of her husband's rationality. Baldeschi now sets about writing the masterpiece of which he believes himself capable. But his initial efforts are disappointing, and he decides that he had better abstain from love-making until the book is finished in order not to dissipate his "inspiration." In due course, he discovers that vanity has blinded him to his lack of talent, and furthermore that his hot-blooded wife has let herself be seduced by the apelike village barber.

Baldeschi succeeds in reconciling himself to his mediocrity. Conscious of his need for greater clarity, he forgives his wife and the novel ends on a hopeful note. *Conjugal Love* is one of Moravia's best books, an altogether masterly study of the relations between a man and a woman.

In *The Conformist,* the focus is on the corruption of a civilized man by the distempered modern world — the Italy of the nineteen-twenties and -thirties. Marcello Clerici's destructive impulses as a child, and a sinister experience with a homosexual whom he thinks he has killed, cause him to grow up with a harrowing sense of abnormality and guilt, from which he seeks refuge in an obsessive pursuit of normalcy. His idea of normalcy is to be "like everybody else" — to conform rigidly to his environment. But a series of shattering experiences brings home to him that the normality he has pursued is a mirage and that his traumatic sense of guilt was unjustified, because no man can remain innocent. The story illustrates — brilliantly at first but in the end too patly — what might be called the logic of the Absurd: in his flight from anarchic impulses which, though unfortunate, were human, Clerici surrenders himself to the inhuman discipline of a dictatorship, and he is forced into the genuinely abnormal role of political spy and participant in cold-blooded assassination.

Moravia's latest novel, *A Ghost at Noon,* starts out with virtually the same situation as *Conjugal Love* and is a complementary treatment of the same themes. In this case the narrator, Riccardo Molteni, sacrifices his ambitions to what he believes to be his wife's needs. After two years of happy marriage, he decides to give up the very simple life they have been leading. He purchases the sort of home which his wife has always longed for; and to pay for it he abandons his efforts to write a great drama and gets a well-paid job as script-writer for a movie producer called Battista, a more sophisticated version of the barber of *Conjugal Love*. At precisely this moment Molteni notices that his wife — a rather uneducated, submissive, loving creature — has become indifferent and evasive. He eventually wrests from Emilia the admission that she no longer loves him, that in fact she despises him. She refuses, however, to tell him why; and from here on the novel — in Italian more appropriately entitled *Contempt* — becomes a fascinating *whatdunit:* a complex, suspenseful, very cleverly stage-managed drama of psychological inquiry.

Molteni has been assigned to prepare a film treatment of *The Odyssey* in collaboration with a German director, Reingold; and Battista, who has designs on Emilia, invites them all down to his villa in Capri. Battista has made it clear that what he wants is a spectacular, strictly commercial film. Reingold, a pious Freudian, is determined to reinterpret *The Odyssey* as a drama of "unconscious conjugal repugnance" between Ulysses and Penelope. And Molteni, revolted by both these approaches, wishes to be faithful to Homer: he sees *The Odyssey* as an epic of the nobility of human effort in the marvelous infancy of civilization.

But out of Reingold's analysis of the relations between Ulysses and Penelope, there comes to Molteni an understanding of why Emilia despises him and is beginning to respond to the advances of Battista, whom she originally found repugnant. The explanation does not lie in anything that Molteni has done but in the fact that he is a genuinely civilized man and Emilia is a primitive woman corrupted by the modern world. Since her introduction to Battista's world, her husband's reasonableness, his consideration for her, his lack of commercial success, have become in her eyes the mark of a contemptible weakling. Unconsciously she has come to identify honor, pride, virility, with the dictatorial attitude of the coarse tycoon, Battista.

A Ghost at Noon has a flaw that is characteristic of Moravia: the connections between the discussion of *The Odyssey* and the conflict of the Moltenis are so neatly worked out as to seem slightly artificial. Even so, with its forceful rendering of character, scene, and mental state, the book is an impressive example of Moravia's compact and mordant artistry.

When Moravia's first two novels were published in this country in the nineteen-thirties, they met with a decidedly discouraging reception. Then, in 1949, Farrar, Straus & Young reintroduced him to American readers with *The Woman of Rome;* and the six Moravia titles published since that time have sold — in their hard- and soft-cover editions — more than 2,000,000 copies.

The most important critical complaint about Moravia's fiction has been that, as one writer put it, he keeps cultivating "a petty Inferno from which apparently there is no exit." It has been charged that his people are heartless and helpless; that he can only write with passion about the failure of passion; in sum, that his fictional world is unremittingly desolate and disagreeable. Now undoubtedly the fact of his being an invalid throughout his youth predisposed Moravia toward pessimism. But his pessimism ceases to be a purely negative attitude when set against the literary tradition of the Fascist era and against the realities of his environment. It represents a necessary corrective to spurious optimism, "mistaken ambitions," and consolatory cant about the nature of human existence. Moravia might well say what Gide said of himself: "To disturb — that is my role."

In Moravia's vision there is no romanticism, no ideology whatsoever, and no moral indignation. Nothing human is alien to him. When asked in an interview why his principal male characters were almost all unsympathetic, he replied that on the contrary all — even Clerici — were in some way sympathetic. His somber estimate of the human condition has led him not to existentialist nausea but to melancholy compassion.

What the critic called Moravia's "petty Inferno" *does* have an exit. It is reached via relentless clarity and self-acceptance without complacency. To Moravia the one indisputable and reliable virtue is self-honesty. It has often been said that he is a moralist without faith in a moral order, but it would be more exact to say that he is a moralist whose theme is the danger of moral ambition. His fiction contains an unobtrusive but distinct didactic undertone, which tells us that we are never as bad as we think we are, and that we can never be as good as we think we can be — two notions which the Anglo-Saxon, imbued with moralism and meliorism, is apt to look upon as indulgent and defeatist. Moravia does not intimate that clear-eyed self-acceptance will unlock the gateway to Paradise, but simply that it enables us to make the best of Purgatory. The heroine of *The Woman of Rome* observes: "I have often wondered why misery and anger dwell in the hearts of people who try to live according to certain precepts and to conform to certain ideals, and why those people who accept their destiny — which is mainly emptiness, darkness and weakness — are so often gay and carefree."

In Moravia's Purgatory, the sun also rises and the sea brings refreshment. Its creator has a straightforward and engaging appreciation of the good material things of life — fine clothing, comfortable homes, a pastry and a glass of vermouth. Although in Moravia the wages of fleshly love are usually unhappiness, the flesh itself remains a perennial wonder — a thing of strange, tormenting beauty. Most importantly, Moravia's fictional universe is one in which men and women are interesting and valuable purely in themselves. Whatever the issues dramatized in his work, it is always the individual that counts. "In the modern world," he once said, "everyone is trying to remake society. I have at heart, above all, the human person . . . with his name, occupation, age, face, body, arms, legs."

CHARLES J. ROLO

Alberto Moravia

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MISTAKEN AMBITIONS

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Translation by Arthur Livingston

PART ONE

I

NOTHING was more repugnant to Pietro Monatti than human conduct based on calculation, impulse, or any of the other arbitrary justifications of selfishness. Possessed of an instinctive dislike for the petty devices, the vulgar smallnesses of egoism, he had a no less instinctive admiration for generous, disinterested acts and aims. His hatred for all the forms that self-love commonly assumes, and especially for worldly ambition, material interest, arrogant emulation, had been intensified by a number of painful experiences during his early youth. Those experiences had brought him to the firm belief that he possessed a conscience so strict and so fastidious that he would never be able to follow through, or accept the profits, along any line of private policy that was determined wholly by considerations of advantage. Most people, he thought, were selfish by nature and managed to behave generously now and again only through a subtler calculation or by sheer strength of will. He, instead, had a natural bent towards unselfishness, honesty, altruism, and all the other human virtues. That discovery had been the conclusion of a protracted period of crisis in his life and, more noteworthy still, the beginning of a period of success and prosperity. It had brought him inner peace and enabled him to reorganize his life according to the ideas that seemed best to harmonize with his temperament, so that he had come to know the tranquillity of spirit that is indispensable to effective work and to fruitful relations with one's fellow-men.

Yet that afternoon, at Maria Luisa's, he suddenly became aware that his peace of mind had deserted him and with it his now wonted self-assurance. He had come to the woman's house in response to an invitation which she had given him that forenoon during a chance meeting on the street. He did not know why such a cordial proposal should have come to him from a person who had always evinced indifference if not actual hostility towards him. But in her ways, her words, her whole demeanour, he had thought he could detect a sort of awkward allurement, and the notion that in her present situation Maria Luisa could easily be thinking of a love intrigue had suddenly filled him with a powerful and very physical commotion which he was quite unable to put out of his thoughts. Never mind that he had just become engaged to the sister of Maria Luisa's husband! Quite apart from any element of disloyalty, an adventure that fell into his lap in that gratuitous manner was not at all to his liking! In fact the whole idea annoyed him exceedingly and no less the inner commotion that went with it.

"I should never have said I would come!" he reflected, as he sat there, nevertheless, in the woman's drawing-room waiting for her to appear. "I should have refused—that's what I should have done!"

From time to time he would imagine that he had mastered the vulgar yet vigorous craving which the unexpected invitation had stirred in him, and that the old guileless tranquillity was again resuming its sway over his roily expectancy. But he had only to cast a glance about the room for the accursed thought to reassert itself more urgently, along with the disturbance that accompanied it. It was a big rectangular room, which seemed to be made larger still by the naked walls and an annoying reflected glare of the quiet, pallid, sunless winter afternoon. Everything about it seemed to suggest provisionalness, transiency, uncertainty, perhaps discouragement, at any rate availability for a rapid, fleeting, very casual adventure. The floor was dusty and creaked under one's step. The empty corners had long been unswept—cobwebs would soon be filling them. The centre chandelier was down, and the short twisted ends of the wires protruded through the ceiling like the roots of a torn-up tree. The two windows had no curtains, and through them, as in a badly taken photograph, one could see too much of a white sky that hung lifeless and gloomy over the treetops in the garden opposite. That all bespoke Maria Luisa's state of mind and the meaning of her invitation.

One corner of the room only seemed to be inhabited, and in that dreary prospect it looked like one of those make-believe apartments that are set up in huge cinema studios to represent real rooms as the scene of real experiences. It was filled by a broad divan covered with pillows. On a stand beside it stood a lamp with a cigarette box and an ashtray filled with stubs. A gramophone sat open on a chair and the rug about the couch was littered with disks, newspapers, books. There was an habitual something about so much disorderliness that led Pietro to imagine that the woman must have been spending most of her day on that couch, gazing blankly out into the bare white room, nursing her jealousy and the designs of her wounded pride. To escape his own inner disturbance, Pietro picked up one of the books on the rug, and he was skimming it rapidly when a door he had not noticed opened to the right of the divan, and Maria Luisa entered the room.

She was wearing a long brown skirt, high-waisted, with a short jacket open in front. There was something stiff and dignified about her slow silent entrance—or was it merely confidential? For she closed the door behind her with an uncalled-for attentiveness before she turned towards Pietro, after an unnecessarily protracted delay, in the most casual manner conceivable. Her face wore an expression of such distant coldness, her brows arched so haughtily over two hard green eyes, her lips were pressed in such a contemptuous smirk about a long cigarette-holder with a lighted cigarette, that Pietro felt his lustful expectancy vanish as in a flash, while the uncomfortable feeling of being disliked that he always sensed in Maria Luisa's presence regained its hold on him.

He rose to greet her and then sat down again, greatly relieved to be rid of his temptation but still too much awed to be able to think of anything interesting to say to the lady. There was a moment of awkward silence.

Finally, with a wave of his hand about the great empty room, he thought of saying:

"It's my first visit here, Maria Luisa. I have not seen you for months. How have things been going with you in your new life?"

Pietro would not have been so cowed had he managed to guess what was going on behind that haughty mask of a face. "How can I make that fellow understand that I am ready to become his mistress?" That was the one thought in the woman's head just then. There was no liking for Pietro Monatti in her design. Maria Luisa had always despised him and she still did. She had simply conceived the foolish and bitter resolve to betray her husband as a way of asserting her own independence in the face of his betrayal of her. That idea may have been to an extent coloured by another malevolent desire—to rob her sister-in-law of her betrothed in order to even the score for imaginary wrongs that her husband's sister had done her. It had been a simple plan, embarrassed by no inner scruple and free of any sentimental complications. But now that the time to execute it had come, Maria Luisa discovered that it bristled with difficulties.

She had had no experience with love intrigues. During the seven years of her married life she had been absorbed not with amours but with the concerns of society. An unshakable resolve on vengeance was prompting her to throw herself into Pietro's arms, yet her whole character was steeped in convention and recoiled in disgust before such an enterprise. She had thought of assuming a languorous, provocative air that she had deemed appropriate to her intent, softening the expression of her face and making her eyes talk. But she could feel at once that instead of that she was stiffening, that her eyes were growing hard, and that the smirk of haughty disdain was congealing like cooling wax around the long cigarette-holder which she was pressing between her teeth with all the strength of her jaws.

Furthermore, the difficulty she felt in freeing herself of the conventional attitudes that had contributed so much to her success in society was increased by the vague, half-conscious dislike that Monatti's physical appearance inspired. Pietro was what would ordinarily have been called a handsome man. He had coal-black hair and, in the fashion then prevailing, combed it smooth and glossy low down on his neck. Under that glistening helmet his full, well-moulded face would have been attractive enough had it not been for a certain frigid pallor, the pallor one sometimes notes in priests and men of sedentary lives, not unhealthy, but flat, solid, opaque, so that it seemed to emphasize the ardent expression of his large black eyes. He was somewhat broad at the hips, and his legs may have been a little short for the rest of his body, so that at first glance he gave an impression of being overweight. In brief he had all the elements of masculine charm, but along with them, also, something that seemed to cancel their effects—perhaps the dull seriousness of his bearing; or it may have been his manner of dressing, which was at once fastidious and unattractive—unfailingly a dark-blue suit with a stiff collar and a starched shirt, and carefully chosen neckties that he tied too tight. Maria Luisa had always been conscious of the repulsive aspect of his appearance, and she was even more so now when she had set her mind on an amour with him. However, at the bidding of her wounded pride she tried to assure herself that her dislike was due more to her own inexperience than to any shortcomings in the young man himself, that it was a question of just breaking the ice. Eventually, she concluded, her repugnance would disappear, she would find a lover in him, and accounts with her husband would be balanced.

"My new life?" she answered, affecting a satisfied calm that she was far from feeling. "It could not be going better, my dear Pietro. I am seeing no one but my maid, and her only when I actually have to. I spend my time, as you may have noticed, reading." And she pointed to the books that were lying about on the rug and which, as Pietro had remarked, were all uncut. "Every so often I run off a disk on the gramophone, or else lie full length on my couch doing nothing at all, or at the most thinking of my situation. I sit up a couple of hours after supper and then I go to bed. In a word, an ideal life!" She inhaled a long puff from her cigarette and coolly breathed out the smoke through her nostrils. However, there was a clutch at her throat. The truth was, she had never felt so desperate. "You have no idea, Pietro," she resumed after a moment, "what a relief it is to wake up in the morning and think: 'Well, today, thank Heaven, I have no invitations, no appointments, and the whole blessed day is my own.' You cannot imagine what that means to me—to be free of a luncheon engagement, three or four teas, and then a dinner, when it is not a full-fledged reception; not to have to be agreeable to dozens of different people in the space of three or four hours, not to be interested in a single charity, in short to have a few moments of intimacy and quiet all to myself. During this month of complete solitude I have discovered pleasures I never knew existed, and I find them much more delightful than the ones we ordinarily go mad about—the pleasure of being alone, of reading a book, of thinking a thought. I can tell you one thing: I have enjoyed my loneliness." She tossed her head defiantly, but she felt that the wretchedly formal chatter to which society had accustomed her was stifling her like a gag and that she would never succeed in freeing herself of it. "Really, my dear Pietro," she concluded, "I have come to think that we all lead very scattered lives—too much so. We see too many people, we have too many engagements, we are too much like butterflies. You too ought to go into retirement once in a while, as I have done."

The ultimate destination of that long verbal detour had been transparent enough to Pietro, but he was busy trying to find some ideal justification for the wholly physical attraction the woman inspired in him. He could never have dreamt of accepting the lure outright.

"If what you say is true, Maria Luisa," he began, sincerely, and with ready conviction, "and I have no reason to suppose it is not true, I am inclined to think that I owe you an apology. Really, I had been thinking of you all along as something altogether different from what your words would now lead me to believe."

"How did you think of me?" the woman asked, looking at him hopefully.

Pietro did not catch the expression in her eyes.

"Oh, I thought no end of silly things. Mistaken impressions! I thought you were a frivolous sort of person, satisfied with yourself, all taken up with society. In a word, I did not think you very interesting. And I also thought that you could not endure me. As a result it could never have occurred to me to have anything more than the most casual relations with you. Now, for many reasons, I believe I have changed my mind."

His last words found their mark in Maria Luisa's bewildered heart.

"It isn't true that I could not endure you, Pietro," she replied slowly, inwardly embarrassed and hardly aware of what she was saying. "But you were so evasive with me, so hard to reach! Even had I tried to have more intimate contacts with you, I should not have succeeded."

Her demeanour, as she spoke, was haughtier than ever, but her heart was pounding violently.

"Strange, isn't it?" cried Pietro, nervously. "We each thought that the other was hostile! And we were both mistaken! We were made to understand each other."

"Quite so," said Maria Luisa, less convinced, but, in view of her motives, not less nervous. There was a long silence.

"Explain one thing to me," she finally resumed, with a smile and a tone of forced casualness. "You said a moment ago that you had always considered me a frivolous butterfly undeserving of your interest, but that afterwards you changed your mind, discovered, that is, that I did interest you. Well, what I would like to know"—her voice softened and she blushed in spite of herself—"is what sort of interest you take in me now."

"What sort of interest!" cried Pietro, impetuously and without thinking. "Why, a real interest, without a trace of ulterior motive, a disinterested interest, so to say."

"Oh," said Maria Luisa, crestfallen, "with no ulterior motive!"

"Absolutely none!" Pietro repeated; but as he spoke he raised his eyes and could not help detecting, under the habitual mask of disdain that overspread Maria Luisa's well-rouged face, an expression of dismay and almost of entreaty.

They looked at each other. Maria Luisa's eyes were glistening with excitement and wounded pride.

"Nobody is accusing you of being in love with me," she said at last, with a trace of heat. "I don't see, then, just what sort of interest you can have in me."

Pietro shook his head.

"I don't know," he began ardently. "You strike me as being less happy than I had thought. I should like to make you happier. I may be mistaken, but I have an impression that I might be able to give you all you need—all that Matteo failed to give you."

He looked at her. He was so persuaded of the truth of what he was saying that it required no effort or calculation on his part whatever to extend his hand suddenly and graze her cheek with the tips of his fingers. He saw her close her eyes hungrily under his touch with an expression of fainting, overpowered emotion. Without clearly realizing just what he was doing, he prolonged the caress, his fingers flitting from her cheeks down over her lean hungry throat till, by way of the shoulders, they reached the back of her shaven neck, which she held stiffly erect. But at that point, entirely to his surprise, Maria Luisa collapsed awkwardly upon him and he had a pair of withered lips pressing greedily upon his own. He was conscious of a sweetish taste of lipstick.

So they kissed. Pietro had always supposed that Maria Luisa had been betraying Matteo, her husband, the way Matteo had been betraying her, and was therefore quite expert in matters of sentiment. He was not a little astonished at the unreserved and disorderly cleaving with which she responded to his embrace. It was not the kiss of a sensuous experienced woman. It was the kiss of a spinster who had grown old in continence and in a swirl of unrealized dreams. Maria Luisa was languorous but also undemonstrative. She panted, sighed, writhed, suffering, as it seemed, rather than enjoying. Disconcerted, Pietro felt that he had not so much a mistress as a victim on his hands.

They drew apart and looked at each other. Maria Luisa's eyebrows were still arched in haughtiness; but there was a dazed look in her eyes. They seemed to have become more visible, set off, as they were now, by the flush on her prominent cheekbones. A wisp of her short hair seemed to have caught some of the emotion that glowed on her face. It stood up to one side and there was a sort of tremor in it.

"It does do one good, once in a while, doesn't it?" she said in a voice that panted through the chilly interrogative, as though she were trying to persuade herself that she had enjoyed the kiss and had been entitled to it. "And imagine me all these years, idiot that I was, faithful to Matteo!"

"Really?" exclaimed Pietro, with a sense of shame he could not quite account for.

"Yes," Maria Luisa resumed, still panting, but prey again to her silly rancour. "While I was going to teas and doing charity, he was spending my money to amuse that woman. But now that is over—over, thank Heaven!"

She sat silent for a moment, still too agitated to observe the young man's perplexity. Finally she lowered her eyes upon her own person and asked half to herself:

"Perhaps I had better put on a dressing-gown? This dress seems to stifle me. You stay here," she added, using the familiar "thou." "It will take me only a moment."

She rose and started for the door, but then turned as though she had suddenly thought of something, bent gaily down and picked up one of the disks that were scattered about the rug. She set it in place on the gramophone, winding the machine up with a furious alacrity. The first movements of a one-step became audible in the frigid silence of the room.

"This will keep you company," she said, straightening up and brushing back her hair, which had fallen forward upon her forehead. Before Pietro, again taken by surprise, was able to find a word, she reached the door through which she had entered, and disappeared.

Pietro leapt from the divan, stopped the gramophone, and began to walk up and down the room. Whether because the awkward, inexpert Maria Luisa seemed to him less desirable than the proud, distant marchesa whom he had been accustomed to treat with respect, or because he had suddenly become aware of the dangers involved in an amorous relation with a sister-in-law of his own fiancée, he was in a wholly different frame of mind from that of a lover who has been accepted and is looking forward to a period of bliss. He felt much more inclined to remorse and bad humour than to satisfaction and pride. Quite apart from personal considerations, he was worried by a number of observations he had made in that flash as to the character of the woman and her true situation. He now thought, in fact, that he was again mistaken in his judgment of Maria Luisa. Before the kiss he had imagined in good faith that he might help her by replacing her husband. Now he was just as seriously beginning to think that he would have done much better to hold her off and virtuously advise her to return to her home.

"That was a foolish impulse on my part," he thought. "Maria Luisa is acting in this way because she is jealous of Matteo and wants to show him that she can get along without him. Tomorrow she will be the first to repent of what she has done. There is nothing but pique and wounded vanity in all this. The plain truth is, she was made to stay at home, be faithful to her husband, and go about in society."

He was suddenly seized, further, by a great haste to communicate these maturer reflections to the woman, all the more since he knew that she was in her room undressing and might at any moment reappear and throw her arms about his neck before he could say a word. He knew that he would be doing an unpleasant and, perhaps, a humiliating thing, but he was ready to accept that drawback as a punishment he thought he deserved. "It serves me right," he reasoned. As for Maria Luisa, he was clearly and at all costs resolved to do the thing that he thought was good for her, even at the risk of making her his enemy for life.

He stepped to the door through which Maria Luisa had disappeared and knocked twice.

"Wait—I am almost ready!" called a voice that seemed to him strangely imperious and preoccupied. He opened the door and entered.

As contrasted with the drawing-room, three-quarters empty and glaring with the white light of a cloudy afternoon, the boudoir was sunk in deep darkness and seemed to be completely furnished. A little lamp, of the sort that could be fixed to the edge of a table with a clamp, and covered with a red shade that gave it a very narrow range, lighted with no great brilliancy the head of a broad low bed. Inside the circle of light sat Maria Luisa, in her chemise, one leg over the other. At the moment of Pietro's entrance she had bent over to remove a stocking. She straightened up with a little cry, as though taken by surprise, and looked at him without saying a word.

Mysterious, hesitant, Pietro carefully closed the door and approached the bed. Maria Luisa sat looking at him, her agitated eyes glistening, a strange sort of blush mounting from her neck to her cheeks and gleaming bright through the darker rouge.

"What is it?" she asked finally, planting her hands on the bed behind her and resting her weight on them. "I told you to stay in the other room."

The words themselves conveyed an assurance that contrasted strangely with the querulous tone of her voice. "She will be offended," thought Pietro, studying her, "and she will be wrong!" He stepped forward, earnest, pious, and took a seat on the bed, facing her.

"I came in," he hurried to explain, "because I have thought of something."

Maria Luisa still sat with her hands buried in the bed behind her, her head drawn down between her shoulders. She looked at him, embarrassed. Her garment, pulled tight, showed the joints in her knees. She looked at them and was both surprised and pleased at discovering her virtual nudity.

"What is it you have thought of?" she asked.

"Of you," Pietro answered, fumbling.

"Of me!" she repeated, trying to find a jesting tone. "That is why you came in here? You are just a boy, Pietro! What did you think of me?"

"I thought of something," said Pietro. He was expecting the worst and wanted to have both hands out in front, for a guard. "However, I don't think you are going to like it. You must promise me, therefore, that you won't be angry—and good friends as before!"

She finally released herself from her strained position and sat back against the wall, arranging a pillow behind her shoulders and crossing her legs with some difficulty.

"Something I am not going to like!" she echoed. "Why tell it to me then?"

She spoke in a jesting tone, but Pietro could read only dread and uncertainty in it. "Poor thing!" he thought. "It's clear enough that what she is doing is new to her! She's as frightened as can be! It's all my fault. I should never have let things go this far." Meanwhile his eye fell on a chair that stood at the foot of the bed. Outspread on it lay a pink dressing-gown bordered with white fur.

"Suppose you put this on," he said, getting up and handing the garment to her. "It will be better for you, and better for me."

Nonplussed, she looked at him and then at the dressing-gown.

"Why?" she asked, with a faltering voice. "I am very well this way. It's not cold in here." She took the gown from his hands and tossed it upon the bed. "Anyway—what was it you thought of?"

"Here we are!" thought Pietro, and he tried to force a smile to offer as a palliative for what he had resolved to say.

"It's all my fault, Maria Luisa," he began. "I acted impulsively. I should have thought of it sooner. But after all I have come to the conclusion that I could do you nothing but harm, and that therefore we ought to be friends as before while you go back to Matteo."

He noticed a tremor in her frame and saw a frown gather about her eyebrows.

"What has Matteo got to do with it?"

"Plenty," he replied, smiling the soft but firm smile of a person sure of being right. "Appearances to the contrary, he has much more to do with it than your present attire"—and he pointed to her chemise—"and the kiss I gave you in the other room might lead one to suppose."

There was no reply.

"I knew nothing about you," he resumed after a moment. "I thought I understood you. Actually, I didn't at all. So—I acted impulsively, worse than that. But then, while you were in here, many things occurred to me that I had not thought of. First of all, I realized that you were never made to live alone, this way, all by yourself and apart from society."

"Who told you that?" interrupted Maria Luisa angrily. She was still holding her head back against the wall and her legs crossed, but she was evidently finding it harder to mask this humiliation under her show of pride than the agitation she had earlier experienced.

"Everything tells me so," the young man replied. "This house you are living in, the way you talk about society, your manner of acting. Then again, I have seen that you still love Matteo and cannot do without him, that all this business is just a matter of jealousy and wounded pride, after which you will go back to him as though nothing had happened. For all those reasons—though, to tell you the truth"—he gave an eloquent smile—"I find you fascinating and the temptation is strong—I think it is better to halt exactly where we are and remain the good friends we have always been."

He fell silent, looking at the woman with an expression that he intended should be at once tender and decisive, the expression proper to a benefactor aware of his merits. But Maria Luisa's mind was in utter confusion. It was not so much that Pietro's refusal had offended her and hurt her in her pride. It had given her a mad sense of panic. So everything, she thought, was to turn out badly for her! She had gone that far to no purpose, she had exposed her nakedness to a man she despised, she would be left without a lover to set against her husband, she would be thrown back upon her lonely life as a profitless demonstration of indifference, while Pietro would be at liberty to go about town saying that he had had her as a semi-naked suppliant at his feet and that he had spurned her. She could feel the catch at her throat again and was hardly able to restrain her tears. Eventually it occurred to her that Pietro might be hesitating out of scruple, and judging that she ought to make every effort to entice him, she managed to control her panic.

"How silly!" she exclaimed, sitting up and forcing a laugh. "How silly, my poor Pietro! And you said you understood me! It is not at all true that I cannot live alone this way apart from society. To say a thing like that shows that you do not understand me! Those balls, receptions, card parties—you have no idea how they bored me, and how happy I am to be rid of them as a result of all these troubles, and free to live a life of my own. It is not true either that I am in love with Matteo and that I left our home only out of pique and jealousy. I do not love him and I never have. I left him not in jealousy but from a sense of self-respect, from good sense. I cannot grant that a husband of mine" —her voice hardened—"should be led around by the nose by a stupid, vulgar, insignificant adventuress, that a man as old as he is should make himself ridiculous in the eyes of the world by a mere girl who, as regards age, could be his daughter."

She paused a moment, then with a nervous pent-up gesture, frowning darkly and pulling the lace border of her chemise over her crossed legs, she resumed:

"No, you have not understood me." She lowered her eyes in weariness and disgust. "I do not need Matteo. At the most, he, his sister, his mistress, and all the others, need me. But anyhow, why drag in Matteo? It would be asking a great deal, you must admit" —she laughed again, but she had lost her self-confidence and was again in a panic—"that after poisoning my life for seven long years, he should go on poisoning it for me now when, thank God, we are living apart, entirely apart, from each other. Besides, there are more important things than those, don't you think?" She fixed her face in a tragically earnest immobility, stretched out a hand upon the young man's head, and stroked his hair and then his cheek. Finally she seized him by the chin, as one might do with a child, looking at him with a gaze half imperious, half of entreaty. As she bent forward in that attitude the creases that formed round and round in her chemise seemed to blend with the pink folds of flesh that were raised about her breast by the pressure of the strong round arm awkwardly thrown forward. Her head, however, erect, questioning, wilful, seemed to draw back as though to check the lower impulse of her body and make sure of the outcome of her lure before it too surrendered.

But once Pietro's altruistic convictions had taken a firm hold, they were not so easy to dislodge.

"You, Maria Luisa," he said, smiling, removing her hand with a firm grasp from his chin and laying it on the bed, "you are now thinking of doing something which you would certainly repent of in the end. You can say anything you wish, but I am convinced that you will finally be reconciled with Matteo. For that reason, I repeat, suppose we do nothing and remain good friends."

He saw her blush again with that strange deep blush that seemed to come rather from an impure excitation of the skin than from any inner impulse of shame. She drew back against the wall and gazed at him from under the proud arch of her eyebrows with a gaze that betrayed her perplexity in spite of its intent to seem penetrating.

"Good friends!" she finally managed to stammer. "We have never been good friends."

"Why not?" answered Pietro, who thought that he was keeping exceedingly cool and perspicacious under the impact of the woman's disordered passion. "I am sure we have always been good friends, and are going to be even better friends henceforward."

At that, Maria Luisa's rage at feeling herself humiliated by someone she had always despised was intensified by the further rage of hearing herself lectured and admonished. Convinced from the outset that Pietro could not be really interested in her welfare, she had no great difficulty in locating the selfish considerations that necessarily underlay such perfect altruism. "He is afraid of getting into trouble," she reflected, "of endangering his marriage. That is why he drew back." At that thought a great hatred and a violent thirst for revenge suddenly replaced her feeling of discomfiture. Earnest, self-contained, silent, she rose from the bed, picked up the dressing-gown, put it on, turned on the ceiling lights, and then went and sat down at her dressing-table at the other end of the room near the window. From his seat on the bed Pietro saw her take now one, now another, of the silver instruments on her table, smooth her hair, rouge her cheeks, and colour her lips, all the while keeping an attentive gaze on the mirror. Then she lighted a cigarette and took a few puffs, calmly, thoughtfully, studying the folds that formed in the dressing-gown along her seated body. Some moments passed. Then she seemed to remember the young man again. She rose and returned to her seat at the head of the bed, with her shoulders resting against the wall.

"After all, Pietro," she suddenly began without looking up, pretending to be giving all her attention to the polish on her nails, "might one know the reasons why you are thinking of marrying Sofia?"

She was using the formal "you" again.

Pietro was startled. He had not been expecting that sort of question. However, he found an answer.

"My reasons? Why—the reasons that people have had for marrying since the world has been the world. Because I love Sofia."

He saw her eyes shift to the lighted point of her cigarette.

"You see, Pietro," she said after a time, "it is all right and proper for you to say that. Your mistake is in saying it to me. You cannot expect me to believe you."

They looked at each other. "She is hurt," he thought, "and is trying to hurt me by saying unkind things." He was suddenly seized with a great compassion for a woman so lost in the darkness of her errors, and with a correspondingly exalted sense of his own high-mindedness and understanding.

"Notice, Maria Luisa," he warned, smiling, "I know what you mean and the reasons why you say it. However, we can ignore that—suppose we go on. You think, then, that I am not in love with Sofia?"

By this time Maria Luisa could not see that glint of indulgence and superiority in Pietro's eyes without feeling a blaze of impetuous wrath and bitter hatred take entire possession of her. However, she controlled herself.

"I have never thought anything else," she replied dryly, decisively. "To begin with, if you really loved her you would not be here."

"What has that got to do with it?" said Pietro, a little shaken. "This is quite a different matter. My interest in you has been and is something quite different from my love for Sofia."

He noticed her smile. Then, generous, patient, she replied:

"Oh, come now, Pietro! You are too intelligent a person and too little fooled by yourself to believe in earnest that you are marrying for romance. Everybody knows, and Sofia probably knows too, that you are marrying for every reason except romance. Pray, do not misunderstand me! No one ever dreamed of blaming you for that. You are young, you are not rich, you are nothing much. There is every reason why you should think of your future. Your mistake, if anything, lies in a miscalculation. For your purposes you should have turned to almost anybody except Sofia."

"Which means?" he asked faintly, not a little discomfited.

"Which means," explained Maria Luisa sweetly—the fact that she could get her revenge without in any respect overstepping the bounds of literal truth kept her words free of any intonation of gloating—"which means that Sofia is not at all the person you need. Never mind that Sofia is not a pretty girl at twenty-seven, and that at thirty she will be positively ugly. Never mind, either, that for your career you need an intelligent, tactful woman, whereas Sofia is a stupid creature who will certainly do you more harm than good. Let's keep to more essential matters, to the matter of her money, that is. You probably imagine, as everybody else does, that Sofia is rich. Rich she would be, had Matteo, before his marriage to me, not been correspondingly poor. Now I am on hand to pay Matteo's bills—his bad guesses, his mistress, and all the rest. But who was there before I married him? Sofia! Sofia—waiting for some idiot of an heiress to step in and marry her brother and take the burden off her hands! So I am afraid, you see, that her money will simmer down to very little. In view of all that"—and she turned in a lavish sort of way towards the lamp table, took a cigarette, and inserted it in the holder—"in view of all that, when people tell me things about you . . ."

"About me?" he stammered. "What sort of things?"

"Oh, I don't know—that you are a fortune-hunter, a climber, and worse— I always answer: 'Now, not so fast! He may be all that, and for my part I think he is. But not in this case—not in this case! It may turn out in this case that Sofia is getting the good thing, and not he.' "

Those revelations as to his reputation were so at variance with the picture Pietro had of himself that they completed his discomfiture. For a time he sat looking at the woman in sheer amazement and could not find a word to say. He ended by grasping at the notion that Maria Luisa was talking in that way to avenge the hurt he had caused her.

"Maria Luisa," he said, "you have every reason to hate me. I am the first to admit that I have behaved badly with you. But that is also the reason why you are saying such distressing things. If what has happened here had not happened, you would not be talking to me in such language."

No answer could have given Maria Luisa greater pleasure. In following that tack Pietro was putting himself unawares into her hands.

"Why, no, Pietro," she cried in a tone of sweet surprise, "you are mistaken. You must not imagine that I am mentioning these topics because of any grievance I may have against you. That would be mean and unjust on my part. What has happened is over and past. It may have hurt me, but that is all. It does not count otherwise. No, what I have been saying I have always thought, and if I have not said it to you long before this, it was because I took it for granted that we were all agreed. Now it seems that that is not the case, and I find it strange. For really"—she was now speaking in her best society manner—"I can't understand how a man as intelligent as you should be so bent on passing for something that he isn't."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, I don't know—your trying to pass as a sort of idealist, whereas really, and luckily too, you are a very sensible person, with your feet planted solidly on the ground. For example, just now"—Maria Luisa could feel herself blushing again—"why did you try to make me think that you were interested in my welfare and therefore advised me to discontinue this style of living and go back to my husband? Wouldn't it have been simpler to say to me: 'Maria Luisa, I like you a lot, but if Sofia finds out about us, I shall lose a match which, after all, I consider more important to me than an affair with you. Suppose therefore we go no farther'? Tell me, wouldn't it have been simpler—and more decent of you, too?"

She forced another laugh, but hatred now blazed overtly in her eyes. Her whole body seemed vibrant. Pietro was far too conscious of the high-minded motives that had induced him to renounce Maria Luisa not to feel that her words were inspired by spite and bad faith.

"On the contrary," he protested in frank indignation, "if there ever was a moment when I was not thinking of myself but of others—the others being in this case you—that was the moment. I may have been more or less selfishly preoccupied at other times. But just then my one thought was: 'Is it better or not better for Maria Luisa that we should be lovers?' Though it was a painful decision to make, a very painful decision, I decided that it was not to your best interests."

"What a liar!" thought Maria Luisa, but at sight of those eager eyes, that earnest, sincerely sorrowful face, she almost admired the young man's dexterity in simulation.

"Well," she actually said, "you are quite at liberty to consider yourself a prodigy of altruism. You should know, however, that you stand alone in that opinion. Everyone else, without exception, thinks differently."

"What do they think?"

"Roughly, just what I think"—the conviction that she was telling the literal truth allowed Maria Luisa to cling to a cruelly matter-of-fact tone—"that you are a climber, a snob, a schemer, that it is a mistake ever to trust you, and other things that I won't trouble to mention."

Pietro's discomfort was great, but it derived not, as Maria Luisa might have imagined, from rage and shame at seeing his real character discovered, but from a violent sense of injured innocence. "They all speak ill of me," he thought, almost in tears. "According to them there is no baseness of which I am not capable. Really I am far, far better than any of them!" He sat motionless, with lowered eyes. Finally he looked up at the woman.

"If I were to tell you the real story, Maria Luisa, would you promise to give me your frank opinion on it?"

"There is no need of asking such a question," she replied, hiding her curiosity under her usual mask of aloofness.

Pietro threw back his head, stared into space, sighed, and then began in a voice that trembled with the sense of injured innocence which now utterly filled his soul:

"Well, if you really want to know—if I must tell you the exact truth—it is all much simpler than it seems. When I made up my mind to propose to Sofia, I thought I was in love with her, and that was all there was to it. I knew that she was rich, titled, and all the rest, but such things did not occur to me till afterwards. Now you must admit that for a fortune-hunter, a climber, a man who is thinking of his own interests, that is not so very much."

He was panting slightly as he ended. He eyed the woman with a glance that bespoke boiling indignation and a devastating irony. She sat with her eyes proudly lowered, with her loose dressing-gown drawn about her like a fur wrap. As she pulled at her cigarette with short rapid puffs, quite abstracted, she gave no remotest indication of having even heard what the young man said.

"Your great defect," she finally commented, "is that you rely far too much on the stupidity of people. You ought to remember that not everybody is like Sofia."

"What!" Pietro exclaimed, hurt. "You don't believe me?"

"Oh, come now, Pietro," said Maria Luisa, reassuming her tone of pleading sweetness. "How can you expect me to believe you? How expect to convince me of something that you are the first to disbelieve? Perhaps you are afraid that I couldn't keep your secret and would go telling it all about? I can't imagine whom I could tell it to, since there are no two opinions of you in the first place. Or are you afraid that I would judge you harshly? Dear me, marriages based on interest are made every day, and they will always be made. My own—" she concluded with a spendthrift's generosity, "what was my own but a match of that sort? Do you imagine that I loved Matteo, or he me? Come now, don't be so romantic! A little sincerity at least!"

This request for sincerity of a man who thought he was sincere to a scruple, stupidly, ruinously sincere, had its inevitable effect. After a moment of angry silence, Pietro replied:

"But you must believe me—I have told the truth." Then after a pause: "That you may have made a selfish marriage is no concern of mine. All that that means is that you are a person of that sort. But if what you say were true of me, I would break with Sofia for good and all."

He saw her draw herself up in her wonted pose of crushing haughtiness.

"Now you are becoming insolent."

She did not have time to finish. There was a cautious knock at the door, and then another.

"What is it?" she asked, turning in that direction.

"The Marchesa Sofia is here," answered the maid from beyond the door.

For a moment Maria Luisa seemed to be in doubt. She considered carefully. Finally she said, laying down her cigarette and rising:

"All right! Tell her that I shall be there directly."

Angry, worried, Pietro sat where he was, on the bed, rolled his eyes up towards her, and taunted her reproachfully:

"Now go and tell her that I am here and that I tried to make love to you!"

Maria Luisa had sat down again at her dressing-table. She made no answer. Finally she stepped to the door and opened it.

"My brother Stefano is in Rome," she said dryly. "I asked you to come here today that I might take you to call on him. I want you to know each other. Wait here a moment, if you please. I shall be ready soon."

By that time Pietro had sufficiently recovered from his anger to reflect that a declared hostility on the part of his intended sister-in-law might prove dangerous. He leapt to his feet and ran to the door before she could close it.

"Please, Maria Luisa!" he begged. "I am in your hands. Don't tell Sofia!"

They looked at each other.

"Why, Pietro!" she answered. "What do you take me for? Besides, what makes you think I care whether you marry Sofia or not?"

The young man lowered his head, but then returned to the attack:

"Well, you see, I feel as though I have not behaved very well towards you. In a sense, you might feel you had every right . . ."

In the shadow cast by the door the woman's face took on an expression of feigned amazement.

"What?" she exclaimed. "You are still thinking of that? Please, my dear Pietro! I don't see why you should even dream that you have acted badly. Furthermore," she added, with a glint of hatred in her eyes, "that would be crediting me with intentions I never had. Don't imagine I was in earnest! I am sorry, but if you thought that, you are not the intelligent man I took you to be."

Her voice as she spoke had a tone of ladylike bitterness. Then she receded into the shadow of the door, which she closed behind her.

II

At that moment Sofia was waiting in the great bare living-room, seated in the very place where Maria Luisa and Pietro had exchanged their kiss a half-hour before. This was her first intervention in the quarrel between her brother and his wife. Her purpose of course was to eliminate the danger of an annulment and she was well aware that failure in her mission would mean ruin for her brother. However, she had never been able to make head or tail of money matters and was not interested in them anyhow. What really concerned her was not her brother, Maria Luisa, their disagreements, and the rights and wrongs of the case, but the excitement of playing the role of arbiter that had fallen to her. She had assumed that role lightly, irresponsibly, and as something wholly indifferent to her, undertaking it in the same spirit of mingled curiosity, amusement, and hardness with which she would have set out to make a match, or break up one, for a friend of hers. But now the deeper she was getting into her part and the better she was coming to understand it, the better she liked it. What fun to be holding the strings in an affair so complicated and involving so many persons—a brother she loved, a sister-in-law she hated, and a brother's mistress whom she did not know! What fun to think of herself as pulling wires, intriguing, advising, interfering in a word, in a great tangle of goings-on that in no way concerned her! Her enthusiasm for this labour of conciliation that she was about to undertake was something like the excitement that a lawyer takes in a case that he calls "interesting," a case, often, where justice does not triumph, where the truth does not come to light, where the judgment legalizes an abuse or an aggression, but which in no way touches the lawyer's character or convictions.

As for Sofia's convictions in the case at issue, they were fairly clear and fairly simple. Her brother, she thought, was altogether right in betraying a wife as tiresome and unattractive as Maria Luisa. Since the latter had married her brother just in order to have a title, she was getting only what she deserved in his betrayal and was very silly, anyway, to be making so much fuss about it since, quite apart from dramatic flights from home, annulments, fireworks, she could balm all hurts and square all accounts by taking a lover herself as any intelligent woman would. A woman other than Sofia might have been worried by the incompatibility of such convictions with the task of peace-making that she was about to essay. But Sofia was less interested in being consistent than in having her fun. She did not mind a contradiction or two; in fact, the more of them there were, the spicier the flavour of the tricks and manœuvres she would be called upon to devise.

Now, to begin with—for she too sat looking curiously about Maria Luisa's habitation—what had ever possessed her sister-in-law to take that big empty house instead of just going to a comfortable hotel? Could it be, as some asserted, in order to hide an amorous intrigue? Sofia thought she knew her sister-in-law through and through and considered her altogether stupid enough to fail to provide a lover for herself. Under any other circumstances she would have answered with a flat "no." But now the curiosity that her role as peace-maker was whetting in her disposed her to see mystery even where there was none. She was quite willing to believe that something, or rather someone, was at the bottom of such an otherwise unexplainable choice of residence. Who, then, could it be? She was wondering, wondering, in that direction when her sister-in-law appeared.

"My poor Maria Luisa!" she cried, rising and advancing to meet that lady with a timorous smile. They clasped in the centre of the room, and for a moment the bare walls echoed with kisses, sighs, exclamations of affection. They hated each other cordially and would have been pleased enough to scratch each other's eyes out, but in just those circumstances, at just that moment, they were both stirred to something like love. In Sofia these unusual sentiments originated in the role that she had assumed and in which, in a vague half-mimetic fashion, she was beginning to take herself seriously. In the same sense in which an actor may be said to feel the tears and the joys he expresses, so her commotion and her pity might have been called sincere. Maria Luisa's effusions had a much deeper source. Once she had left her bedroom, the haughty indifference with which she had striven to conceal her wounded pride from Pietro and from herself had dropped from her face like a badly fastened mask, and she had again fallen prey to the furious panic that had pursued her relentlessly from the day of her flight from home. She entered the room in dismay, with a choking throat, brimming eyes, and an empty head, vainly striving to bring her scattered thoughts into some sort of order and to find a serene expression for her anguished face. She was in no way prepared for the affectionate greeting of her sister-in-law, and, catching her at that moment of weakness, it almost started her tears. Her resentment suddenly vanished. Filled with a blank terror that she could not control, she found Sofia's visit comforting, much as a prisoner in solitary confinement might take comfort in an unexpected call from his turnkey. Warmly, therefore, she returned the clasp, the kisses, and the exclamations of tenderness.

They drew apart and sat down on the couch.

"How sweet of you, darling, to have thought of me!" Maria Luisa began at once, over-emphasizing perhaps the line of gratitude.

The unusual and significant affectionateness of the term "darling" did not escape Sofia, who meantime had to an extent recovered from her own first commotion. "She is really fed up with this!" she reflected, after a hasty glance at Maria Luisa's face. In the cold light of the winter's afternoon, it was in fact overwritten with a stupid and purposeless despair which was all the more conspicuous from Maria Luisa's efforts to conceal it under a strange raising and lowering of her eyebrows and with movements of her lips that she varied continuously and, as it seemed, with considerable effort.

"But tell me," cried Sofia, without preparing the ground, and in a casual tone, "why did you ever think of taking such a big house instead of going to a hotel?"

Maria Luisa was not ready for such a question. She sat motionless without breathing a word. After a time she answered, hunting for her words:

"I wanted to be alone."

Sofia did not allow her to elaborate the explanation. Lowering her voice she brought her face close to Maria Luisa's, in the manner of one who is making and inviting confidences:

"I am not inquisitive, Maria Luisa—though, for that matter, you could trust me, for anyone will tell you that I have never yet betrayed a secret. You took this house for definite purposes of your own?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know—in order to see someone."

Sofia's face showed wariness but was sternly inquisitorial.

At that question the same strange and impure blush found its way again to Maria Luisa's neck and cheeks.

"Whatever are you dreaming of?" she asked, more in embarrassment than in anger. "To see someone! What an idea! Whom should I be seeing?"

She shook her head and hitched about on the divan, but the despair she had been feeling had lessened. True or false as they may have been, Sofia's insinuations had broken in on her loneliness and given her a comforting sense of being in touch with the world again.

Sofia was not persuaded however.

"If you say that because you are afraid I might talk, you are wrong. Even if it were true, you would have nothing but approval from me. The way Matteo has been behaving I should find it surprising that you had not done so long ago."

Puzzled, half tempted to admit the flattering existence of a relationship which she had tried, and failed, to establish, Maria Luisa finally decided that it was better to evince a certain amount of indignation.

"Why, no, Sofia," she said, archly, "I assure you that you are wrong. When I say no, it means no. Please drop the subject."

"Well," replied Sofia, bending her head, "I wondered, because everybody is saying so."

What a thrill for Maria Luisa to find herself obliged to defend her reputation!

"Oh, whatever a woman does," she answered, naturally, "people will always talk. I came here, I did not go to a hotel, because I don't like hotels and because I wanted to be alone. That is the whole story."

Sofia, however, was not listening. She was hunting for a new approach.

"Imagine whom I guessed!" she said, her face brightening from the thrill of such a shrewd manœuvre. "Fabrizio!"

"Fabrizio! Of course, Fabrizio!" answered Maria Luisa with a deprecation that spelled disgust. "Really now, Sofia, how could you ever have dreamed that I could think of a man like Fabrizio? Fabrizio! Dear me!" She threw back her head and laughed in a tone which she meant to be ironical but which was merely happy. "It's true," she added after a second, coldly, recovering her earnestness and lighting a cigarette at the end of the long holder, "that Fabrizio has always buzzed around me more or less. Just a few weeks ago I had to say to him: 'My dear Fabrizio, it's perfectly useless for you to keep blinking at me. I am not the sort of woman you are looking for.' But from that to his being my lover is a long leap. Your imagination sometimes gets out of hand, my dear."

Chatter of that sort brought Maria Luisa back to a warm and living sense of the world to which she belonged. She would have gone on developing her defence. But Sofia was not listening. She was studying the room again and thinking of something else.

"By the way," she exclaimed irrelevantly, "there's a dance at Marietta's this evening."

Sofia's gossip had cheered Maria Luisa with a comforting reminder of her importance in society, but at the same time it had touched her point of pride and strengthened her resolve not to make peace with her husband. But the allusion to Marietta's party threw her back into her snobbish panic. She could make believe all she wanted to, she reflected, her soul flooding with a furious and squalid ill-humour, but while she was drawing apart from people, life was going indifferently and noisily on its way. In the end no one would be aware of her absence. If she held off from a reconciliation with Matteo very long, any healing of the breach would become impossible, and in the end she would find herself barred from a world that she was so eager to do without but could not.

In the turmoil of such thoughts she sat looking into space before her, her eyes wide open and full of disastrous indecision. Finally she removed the cigarette-holder from the hard grip of her teeth and asked:

"What gown are you going to wear?"

"My black one—you know, the one with the red ribbons."

Sofia had black hair and wore it in loose drooping curls that dangled down over her cheeks and came to rest on her shoulders. Her eyes were black too and met one with the ready faithful glance of a dog. There was a suggestion of down about her full-swelling lips. Her long pointed nose seemed to have been designed by Nature for following scents and nosing about, and fitted perfectly with the prying curiosity that was hers by temperament. Strangely loose-jointed and disharmonious of figure—bowed legs and big feet, a flat boyish figure, large bony hands—she was exceedingly thin where she was thin, and ample to the point of flaccidness in the spots where she was ample. Any other woman who was half oriental and half gipsy, thought Maria Luisa, as she sat looking at her, would be careful to dress in a simple inconspicuous style. Not so Sofia! She liked striking over-ornamented gowns, and loaded her person with necklaces, bracelets, earrings. One more rag, another bit of gold ribbon, never seemed superfluous to her.

Under any other circumstances Maria Luisa would have told her that the gown she proposed was a fright, that it was not becoming to her, that at the most it might have served for a woman twice Sofia's age. But just then the thought of the dance that she would be missing made her forget to be disagreeable to her sister-in-law.

"It's going to be what they call a big affair!" she commented with a sarcasm that was not quite sure of itself.

"Oh, yes, of course," replied the other, with her mind on something else.

There was a moment's silence.

"Do you know what I say?" Maria Luisa resumed. "I am not at all displeased that I shall not be going. In the first place I have had enough of society, at least for the time being. And then again, really, I cannot feel the slightest interest in anything that Marietta does, says, or thinks. Her parties are probably—let's say certainly—the most brilliant and the most popular of the season. But for me they all fall short in one respect or another. That's the way it is with her—an intelligent, lively person, if you wish, but with something about her that doesn't quite satisfy you. As far as I am concerned, I much prefer the dullest evening at Cristina's to the noisiest at Marietta's."

Sofia made no comment on these appraisals. She continued thoughtful. Maria Luisa knocked the ashes from her cigarette and then asked quite offhand:

"Does Marietta know that I have decided"—she blushed, embarrassed—"that I have left Matteo?"

"No, she doesn't know," replied Sofia. "By that I mean—Matteo and I have told everybody, of course, that you are out of town but will soon be back, and they, of course, all think there's something up, and Marietta thinks so too."

"What do they think?"

"I told you—that you are hiding out with some man."

A silence ensued. Then suddenly Sofia burst out in an unloving enthusiasm:

"Just think, Maria Luisa! How amusing it would be if you appeared at the dance this evening! They just wouldn't know what to make of it! How it would mix them up! Oh, what fun! Tell me," she pleaded, bringing her face close to her sister-in-law's and laying a hand on her shoulder, "why don't you just decide to make up with Matteo? For instance, you might come with me now, and we'd all three go together to Marietta's."

An ill-advised suggestion! "They need me!" concluded the other woman. "That's the truth of the matter. They all need me, and I should give in again, like a fool, and make the sacrifice!" Icily she pushed Sofia back.

"No, my dear! Don't dream of such a thing! It's out of the question!"

However, Sofia had pronounced the word. The notion of a reconciliation was in the air. In no wise disconcerted, Sofia insisted:

"Guess, Maria Luisa! Guess what I came here for!"

"Why," replied the other, pretending not to understand, "to see me, I suppose."

The girl shook her head.

"Listen! I may as well tell you right now! I am here because I have sworn to myself to persuade you to go back to Matteo. I shall not take no for an answer."

A great uncertainty overspread Maria Luisa's face at that declaration. Stiffly, however, she replied:

"As long as Matteo stands to that woman the way you know he stands I shall not set foot in the house with him again."

They sat looking at each other. Suddenly the girl found her enthusiasm again and returned a hand to Maria Luisa's shoulder.

"What would you say if I were to tell you that Matteo is ready to drop her?"

"I would answer," she said harshly, "that you didn't know what you were talking about. I know Matteo and I can assure you that he will not be rid of that woman very soon."

"Very well!" Sofia retorted, triumphant. "It may interest you to hear that Matteo has made up his mind to satisfy you and leave her. In case you do not trust him, I will tell you that from here I am going to see her and persuade her to give up Matteo. What do you think of that?"

A long silence followed. Maria Luisa had left her husband on an impulse of unsatisfied vanity and she had demanded that Matteo give up his mistress not so much out of jealousy as from that spiteful sense of envy that inclines people, when they are unhappy, to prevent others from being so. Suddenly finding herself contented on a point that did not concern her deeply, but which she had pretended did, she could not imagine what to do or say. Missing the companionships and the intrigues of her world she had been thinking of a reconciliation as almost inevitable; but now that her husband too seemed to be desiring one, the prospect gave her an hysterical and almost physical sensation of annoyance, rebellion, disgust. Her fears of losing her social position were quieted for the moment, but now her other passions were assailing her again—hazy aspirations for a still hazier freedom, her superficial and self-centred grudge against a frivolous society, her old resentment against a husband who had never been willing to understand her or love her and to whose stubborn contempt she attributed all her failures and all her unhappiness. As these feelings surged violent and uncontrolled within her, she sat stolid and frowning, looking blankly out into the great room. Finally she roused herself.

"I don't understand at all. What are you going to do? You are going to see the woman and ask her to leave Matteo?"

"It's an idea that has been forming in my mind these past three weeks," Sofia explained. She was well satisfied with her progress. "The very evening you left Matteo, I said to him, I said: 'My dear, you have done the foolishest thing in your whole life. You cannot get along without Maria Luisa any more than she can get along without you, were it only for the fun of grumbling and quarrelling and thinking you are victims one of the other. So you had better begin by doing as Maria Luisa says and letting that woman go. I will attend to it. First I'll see Maria Luisa and then I'll see her. I'll talk to them both and I'll set everything in order.' That evening, of course, he refused to hear of such a thing; but I know Matteo. I waited a couple of weeks without breathing a word, then day before yesterday I brought the subject up again. This time, very properly, he consented at once."

"Even to letting you meet his mistress?" cried Maria Luisa, angry and incredulous.

"That was the hardest thing to manage," the girl admitted ingenuously. "He gave all the usual reasons, of course—that it would not look right, that I was his sister, that I should not get mixed up in such things, that there were such differences in our stations. But I was determined at all costs to see just what the famous creature was like, so I held my ground and finally won my case.

"What fun it is going to be!" she exclaimed at that point, entirely forgetful of the purpose of her visit and of the person to whom she was talking. "I shall go in there cold, very much on my dignity. To tell the truth, and between you and me, I haven't the faintest idea what I shall say to her. How should one speak to a woman of that sort? Anyway, I shall go in and state the reasons for my call, trusting to inspiration for the rest. If she is an intelligent woman, as they say she is, she will understand and accept, and it will be so much gained for her. If she proves not to be, she will call me all sorts of names. Never mind—I am ready for anything. . . . Well," she concluded, happening to remember that she was talking to her sister-in-law, "what do you think about my plan?"

"I call it a very fine plan!" replied Maria Luisa sarcastically, looking at her out of the corner of her eyes.

"Why?" asked Sofia, sincerely amazed. "Is there anything you don't like about it?"

Maria Luisa laughed bitterly.

"There is nothing about it that I do like."

Amazed but not mortified, Sofia sat looking into space for a time. Then she remarked aphoristically:

"This trying to help people! I thought I was seconding one of your keenest wishes. I seem to have been mistaken. Well, one has to grin and bear it. But tell me—why am I mistaken?"

"For one thing," Maria Luisa began frigidly, "the moment you have laid your suggestion before that girl she will laugh in your face."

Sofia shrugged her shoulders.

"What of that? I told you that I was ready for anything, that my main object in paying her a visit was to see what she was like. Why is it you never, never manage to understand me, Maria Luisa?"

"Then again," continued the other, her face darkening, "Matteo will not leave her."

At that Sofia leapt seriously into her role as a peace-maker.

"You would try a saint's patience!" she exclaimed heatedly. "Really, now! You forget that it was Matteo himself who sent me here to make this proposal to you."

"In that case," replied Maria Luisa cuttingly, "be so good as to tell him to stop annoying me and to leave me alone. Tell him that I place no jot of reliance on his promises, and that even if he were to keep them I would still have a thousand good reasons for not going back to him."

They sat facing each other, both angry, both red in the face.

"Yes," said Sofia. "But then don't go and say that it is Matteo's fault. And allow me to add that if you were right in putting your foot down at first, you are wrong in sticking to a point of pride now that Matteo is ready to do as you say. It is pride, whatever you may pretend, and nothing else. As regards Matteo, I will further add that I not only approve of his betraying you but that I do not understand why he waited so long. Oh, as for that, he must have, certainly! Imagine if he didn't!"

She had spoken impetuously and in a loud voice. Maria Luisa hushed her with a gesture.

"In the first place you don't have to shout," she began.

"Well, who is shouting?" cried Sofia, beside herself. "Who is shouting? What is so, is so!"

"In the second place," Maria Luisa resumed, "since you have brought this matter up, I am going to give you a piece of advice."

"Let's have it!"

Maria Luisa assumed a cold didactic manner:

"My dear, you have one serious defect. You are always sticking your nose into matters that do not concern you and generally without understanding anything about them. My advice is that you should cure that defect once and for all by attending to your own affairs instead of to those of other people. You might look after your own fiancé, for example."

Sofia was startled and amazed.

"What has Pietro got to do with all this?"

To which her sister-in-law, with a stern and positive toss of her head, replied:

"He has plenty to do with it. Has it never occurred to you that your Pietro might be marrying you for reasons that are—how shall I put it—not altogether romantic?"

Sofia was still more surprised than hurt.

"My dear," she answered, "you talk in parables. I don't understand you."

"What I said was clear enough," Maria Luisa continued. "What I meant was that if you concerned yourself with Pietro as industriously as you concern yourself with my affairs, you would soon see that he did not propose to you out of uncontrollable passion."

Sofia's face took on a thoughtful astonished expression as though the thing she had heard was more incredible than painful.

"A fine idea, that!" she could not help exclaiming. "If it wasn't passion I should truly like to know what it could have been!"

She did not have to wait long for an answer:

"It was money, and getting on in society." And Maria Luisa gave another violent toss to her head. "A person without eyes could see that your Pietro is one disgusting stew of financial speculation and a climber's vanity."

Had someone told Sofia that it was dark night and the moon was shining she would not have been more incredulous.

"My poor Maria Luisa, what on earth are you talking about?" And she clasped her hands in pitying entreaty. "Pietro a schemer! Poor Pietro! If there's one thing in this world Pietro isn't and never will be, it's a schemer!"

"It's clear that you know little about him!" answered the sister-in-law, trying to hide her anger at the girl's unwillingness to believe her. "Notice one thing: I am not the only one who says so. Everybody says so!"

The hotter Maria Luisa grew, the farther Sofia, half inattentive, half surprised, drifted away from the state of mind that her enemy was trying to inspire in her.

"How strange!" she again exclaimed. "And to think that I see Pietro quite differently—oh, quite differently!"

"I don't know what I can do about it," replied Maria Luisa impatiently. In addition to seeing herself disbelieved she now had the pleasure of being pitied and made fun of, she could not say just how. "All that means is that you see him as he isn't and will never be. But what difference does it make? If you are satisfied, everybody else should be." She took a puff or two at her cigarette, threw back her head, and sat looking into space. "With that much understood," she suddenly added, "all I want is that he should let me alone and look for some other woman to make love to."

The uncautious remark fell on Sofia's ears much as the final and clarifying explanation of a difficult word, wedged into the middle of an unmanageable Latin period, might have fallen on the ears of an uninspired schoolboy. At last her sister-in-law's conduct was becoming comprehensible and even justifiable! "What can have happened?" she wondered. "Impulsive as usual, Pietro may have said something without thinking in the least of the consequences, and Maria Luisa, who is a perfect idiot, has gone and imagined that he was making love to her." The more she thought of it, the more she found that the misunderstanding had its ridiculous and improbable aspects: Pietro in love with Maria Luisa, old and a bore! Pietro making advances to his sister-in-law two months before his wedding day! She was to see her fiancé that evening and was already enjoying in foretaste the amused surprise that this extraordinary accusation by Maria Luisa would occasion him.

She turned gaily towards her sister-in-law, and this time her raillery was quite deliberate:

"Now, Maria Luisa, you are not going to tell me that Pietro has had the courage to make a pass at you!"

"I am not in the habit of lying," answered Maria Luisa, with an ineffective show of archness.

"Yes, Maria Luisa, but see"—and Sofia brought her eager amused face close to Maria Luisa's again—"no one is dreaming of calling you a liar, but you must admit you may have been mistaken. You may have taken seriously something that was probably said as a mere jest."

Poisonously angry, Maria Luisa surveyed the girl with blazing eyes but without stirring. Sofia's unwillingness to believe all but strangled her. What would she not have given could she have told the whole brutal truth about what had happened between her and Pietro, and then stepped to her bedroom door and thrown it open that Sofia might see the man she was intending to marry sheepishly crouching on the bed! The temptation was strong, the provocation sanguinary. But in spite of many of her external attitudes, Maria Luisa was neither a free nor a courageous woman, and she was far from being indifferent to appearances of evil. She was not willing, either, to preclude the last possibility of a reconciliation with her husband, and she knew that she could not compromise Pietro without compromising herself. She had to rest content with a partial vengeance.

"He was not jesting," she said, taking a puff at her cigarette and resuming her air of crushing superiority. "When I tell you that he made love to me, you can rest assured that I am not in the habit of inventing things or seeing double. However, do as you please. I have warned you, and as the proverb says, a stitch in time . . ." She rose abruptly. "I'm sorry, Sofia, but I'll have to send you away. I am going out, and I'm late."

"Yes, I have to be going too," said Sofia, glancing at her wrist watch and rising to her feet. "I shall have kept that fatal woman waiting."

So the two of them, the one stiff, frowning, haughty, in a pink dressing-gown, the other pulling at her gloves, with the collar of her fur jacket turned up around her ears, stepped across the great drawing-room. The hall outside, white, unfurnished, was already full of the greyish gloom that on late afternoons in winter makes its way into every human habitation. A faint light sifted down from a skylight in the roof upon a flight of stone stairs. In this dark and uncarpeted hallway, as in the drawing-room, Maria Luisa's house had a newish look, but from a certain impression of loneliness and squalor that it gave it seemed starkly uninhabitable.

"Not very gay, this nest of yours!" Sofia remarked, clinging to the banisters and feeling for the stairs with her toes. She was slightly near-sighted and in that half-light could not see her way.

Maria Luisa was going down ahead of her. She answered without turning around, dryly, decisively:

"Well, I like it, and I'm the only one it has to please."

The word "only" suddenly reminded Sofia of the purpose of her visit, and on reaching the foot of the stairs she asked:

"So, then, what am I to say to Matteo?"

The hall downstairs, circular in shape with a low ceiling, was a replica of the hall above, but it was almost completely dark. Sofia could therefore not see the great perplexity that would otherwise have transpired through the mask of expressionless pride that her sister-in-law habitually wore.

"Say to him?" echoed Maria Luisa, her tone of indifference tinged with a trace of uncertainty and bad humour. "Why, nothing! Wish him good health and good luck."

Sofia judged that a burst of affection would help at just that point. She threw an arm around the other's shoulders.

"Maria Luisa, let me tell you something, and it's gospel truth. You are just dying to get over your tantrum and come back and live with us. Want to know what I think? In your place, I wouldn't wait a minute. I would swallow my pride and follow my instinct."

"But you are wrong, my dear! Entirely wrong!" answered Maria Luisa, drawing away.

"Yes, I'd follow my instinct!" pressed Sofia, working into her role. "And just think! What fun it would be to go to Marietta's together this evening! You would be the sensation of the party."

The other woman shook her head, but there was a shade of homesickness in her tone.

"Impossible, quite impossible!"

"Come, do! Go get your things! I'll wait for you here!"

"No, I said! No! Don't tease me!"

Sofia sighed as she worked at the top button high up under her fur collar. She was disappointed at having failed in her mission to her sister-in-law, but she was not altogether downhearted on that account. She could not help believing that sooner or later, whether out of interest in her social position, or from some other selfish motive, Maria Luisa would find her way back under her husband's roof.

"Very well," she concluded. "What that means is that I shall be calling on you again soon. Besides, I shall want to tell you how I got on with Matteo's girl."

She threw her arms about Maria Luisa's neck. They kissed. Then Maria Luisa opened the door and Sofia stepped out into the garden.

III

BY THAT time the sun had set, but as often happens in winter in large towns, when the sky, without being exactly stormy, is still menacingly clouded, no trace of reddening and no particular change, except a gradual fading of the grey light, had appeared in the air to forewarn of oncoming night. Dark and thoughtful as a forehead wrinkled in doubt, the stark cloud-bank stretched as far as the eye could see over roofs and treetops. The day was ending as gloomily as it had passed.

The entrance to Maria Luisa's villa lay on the side away from the street in the broadest section of the garden. The latter too was new, like the house, and like it it already seemed deserted. The walks had been laid out, but they had not been spread with gravel, and weeds were tall in them. The flowerbeds too had been outlined, but showed no trace of green—they were just mounds of fresh earth, looking like new graves in a cemetery. A round pool had been built at an intersection of four walks, but it was empty and dry, its bottom littered with pebbles and covered with a thin layer of earth. The view was cut off in all directions by a bleak stone wall that still had no bushes or vines to mask it. The yellowish finishing was spotted with the damp here and there and had come off in places. Against it the peaked bars of the iron gate stood out in a conspicuous black, while beyond, in contrast with so much livid squalor, the neighbouring gardens showed a luxuriant, almost tropical green. At that moment, whether from the clouded wintry twilight or from a sort of bluish haze that came from the smoke in the chimneys and hung low in the lifeless air over the flowerbeds, the gate, and the surrounding green, the villa and the garden reminded Sofia of some luxurious habitation that the proprietor's death might have left abandoned immediately after it was built, so that it was already decaying in neglect and gloom.

Picking her way cautiously along the walk of soft earth, Sofia turned the house and reached the half-opened gate. The sloping street beyond was lined on both sides with great linden trees of varying heights, the branches meeting in the middle to form a sort of covered drive that was shady and damp. The still uncemented sidewalks were deserted, though an occasional light could be seen in a window here and there among those up-to-the-minute villas of a real-estate "development." It was one of the bleak but quiet districts of suburban Rome, where flowers and trees are held in high honour, where residences are made to look like rural bungalows, and where on a summer's evening house-owners in aprons and shirtsleeves can be seen watering their own flower-beds with their own hands. After a number of twists and turns the street led into a suburban drive, broad, well lighted, and also deserted. At the corner two taxicabs had their stand. Sofia got into one of them, giving the driver an address on the Lungotevere dei Gracchi.

"Now we'll see what she is like," she thought, heaving a sigh of contented relief as she nestled into one of the corners of the car. She would not have been willing to admit it, but the amused enthusiasm with which she had thrown herself into her enterprise of peace-making was losing its edge under a vague apprehensiveness. It had a double origin. First of all Sofia's conscience was troubling her. She was calling on Andreina in violation of her brother's express wishes. She had not succeeded that morning in convincing him of the necessity of her interview with the woman. He had met all her arguments with the inflexible opinion that it was not proper, and that it would serve no purpose, for his sister to call on his mistress. After many pros and cons they had agreed on a division of labours. Sofia would work at Maria Luisa, while Matteo would begin to accustom Andreina to the idea of a separation. But Sofia's curiosity had proved stronger in the end than her fear of disobeying her brother. She had secretly telephoned the woman and been answered in a tone of happy surprise that guaranteed courteous treatment at the very least. She had therefore made an appointment for that afternoon. Now, however, as she thought over what she had done, it did her little good to pretend to herself that she was old enough to make her own decisions as to what she should or should not do. She could not help feeling that sort of reckless guilt that the schoolboy has in resolving to stay away from school for a lark in the fields.

But then again there was the woman, Andreina, herself. It was all right to say that she could not be just a common person, for otherwise a man like Matteo would never have fallen in love with her; or that, in the worst case, she, Sofia, could simply turn on her heel and cut the interview short. She could not escape a feeling of discomfort, repugnance, social loathing, which emphasized the absurdity and impropriety of what she was doing, and almost tempted her to stop her taxi and ask the driver to take her home. But there was her overwhelming curiosity—"What was the girl really like!" And there was another feeling, the feeling that she, a great lady, a gentlewoman, was doing a noble act in deigning to call on a woman such as Andreina Caracci. She foretasted the humility, the gratitude, the embarrassment, the woman would evince when she appeared, and with no less gusto the attitude of distant dignity and haughtiness which the situation seemed to require of herself in view of the differences in social station, along with that pinch of sisterly Christian charity that is never out of place and which seemed to be even more in place in a situation like the one before her. So it was that the vulgarity, the indecency, the indignity, which she could not help foreseeing in the woman's acts and words, and which almost inclined her to abandon her visit, came to have the fascination for her that some monstrosity might have had, and, supplying also the opportunity to coddle her vanity by allowing her to show her superiority, they ended by being the real attraction in the visit she was making.

As she sat mulling over these fears and fancies, her taxi, a ramshackle affair with a rasping, panting motor, rattling windows, and squeaking springs, made its way into the little dark streets of the older city, and finally issued upon the Lungotevere dei Gracchi. In spite of her rapid cerebration Sofia had been following the route. At that point she sat up and began to watch for numbers of the doors.

It was now dark night and only a few lights illumined the sidewalks. However, the river boulevard, with its linden trees, its double row of dark gardens and its line of crowded houses, was clearly distinguishable for a long distance. It was deserted, save for a single automobile that had stopped in front of the door of a house. As Sofia's taxi approached, her attention was more and more engaged by the car, she could not have told why. Curiously enough her driver suddenly halted in front of the same door and not more than a yard behind the car in question. "So Matteo is here too!" thought Sofia, disconcerted, as she recognized her brother's automobile. However, she mustered her courage, opened the door of the taxi, and alighted on the sidewalk.

The house, a smallish one, showed a dirty white façade towards the street, and the blinds needed paint. The entrance was not in front, but from a garden to one side, which was in turn approached through an iron gate so overgrown with ivy as to suggest that it had not been opened for years. It yielded with the greatest ease, however, as Sofia lifted the latch, swinging silently with all its matting of green on well-oiled hinges and suddenly revealing an assemblage of thick, closely packed, and well-watered shrubs and flowerbeds. A flight of steps of yellowed marble led up to the entrance door, which was in the centre of the building, and was flanked by two lamps with stands of curled bronze and frosted globes. Over it was an old-fashioned flower box porch made of glass and iron.

Inside, in the hall, the plastered walls were white and spotlessly clean, and just as clean was the pavement of alternating red and black tiles. The whole building, nevertheless, had an atmosphere of age and mustiness. A spiral staircase with white marble steps, and a balustrade of black hand-wrought iron with a design of curls and arabesques, led to the upper floors. At the foot stood a cylindrical pilaster, also of marble, topped by a bronze statue, a youth, nude, smiling naughtily, with a quiver of arrows slung over his shoulder and a bow in his hands. He seemed to be a Cupid, and was holding up a sort of stylized tree with three branches, each one bearing a tulip-shaped lamp, lighted. The silent smile of the Cupid, the soft light shed by the treelike chandelier, the neatness of the stairs and the floor, all seemed to emphasize an atmosphere of seclusion and quiet, of which Sofia had been conscious the moment she entered the closed and thickly grown garden outside.

She discovered that she did not need to climb the stairs. The name she was looking for was written on a card on the first door she examined on the ground floor. Not without another twinge of her familiar repugnance, she touched the bell and stood there, waiting.

She had to wait for a long time and was about to ring again when the door was suddenly drawn open in a brusque unexpected manner, and a maid stood in the doorway in front of her. The girl was a blonde and very young, but her not unattractive face was so overladen with make-up, and a microscopic apron was so tightly drawn about her waist, that she suggested less the servant in a home than one of those "walk-ons" of the variety shows who trip, with exaggerated efficiency, to backdrop doors, allow themselves to be embraced by make-believe callers, and, with a prudery well calculated to evoke the mirth of variety audiences, ineffectually try to hide the naked muscular thighs of the ballerina under the apron that is the symbol of their station. Sofia had come on the watch for something significantly out of the ordinary, but she had thought of the possibility only in connexion with the mistress of the house. She was quite taken aback by the blue-painted eyelids, the red-painted lips, and the deftly distributed beauty-spots of the maid before her. "If this is the servant, what will the mistress be like?" she wondered, as she stood there a moment in silence, unable to find words.

"Is this Signora Caracci's?" she finally asked, embarrassed and half incredulous.

"Yes. Won't you come in?" the girl replied, standing aside for Sofia to enter. She seemed to know who the visitor was and just what she wanted.

The anteroom was a square low-ceilinged affair, with walls covered with a dark faded red paper, such as used to be common, years ago, in the waiting-rooms of dentists and physicians. The paper, along with the shiny black furniture with yellowish, bone-like carvings, created a depressing antique atmosphere in the room. In the centre stood a round table, in a corner a clock in the form of a truncated pyramid, with a brass face and an ornament representing a lyre. To the left of the door stood a long chest covered throughout its length by a line of flowerpots. The pots were filled with a variety of luxuriant green plants, no one of which showed a blossom.

"I am the Marchesa Tanzillo," Sofia began, trying to find just that tone of superiority which she imagined appropriate to her social station and to the circumstances in which she found herself. "I have an appointment with Signora Caracci."

And the maid, very self-possessed:

"I'll see whether she is at home."

She half-whispered the words in the secretive promising tone of a person about to say something risqué, meantime wriggling well-rounded flanks inside a funnel-shaped skirt. Then, through a heavy red curtain that hung in a doorway from rings of shiny black wood, she disappeared into a dark corridor that lay beyond.

Left to herself, Sofia made the rounds of the anteroom, examining everything attentively, with a view to finding some clue to the tastes and personality of the mistress of the house and to the manner of life she lived in it. But the furnishings and decorations could not have been less suggestive. In fact the only signs that spoke with any voice at all were a man's hat and a man's overcoat that had been laid on a chair and which Sofia easily recognized as belonging to her brother. Disappointed in her expectancy and somewhat irritated at being kept waiting in a vestibule as though she were a dressmaker, or some other person of like station, the marchesa made another tour of inspection about the room, and finally ventured to take a peep behind the curtain through which the maid had disappeared. As she did so, a door opened at the far end of the dark hallway, and a man came out with his head turned back toward the room he was leaving. It could only be Matteo. Sofia dropped the curtain, fled to a chair on the other side of the waiting-room, and was sitting there in innocent patience when the curtain slipped to one side and Matteo appeared.

He had just ended a long conversation with his mistress during which, as he had agreed with his sister, he had many times been on the point of informing her of his decision, only to fail, each time, to muster the courage to do so. It was as though Andreina had sensed his intentions and set out to dissuade him with the sheer violence of her charms.

Never had she seemed so much in love or so artlessly unaware of the peril that was impending over her. The thought of an abrupt desertion motivated by considerations of interest suddenly filled Matteo with a great repugnance, as at an act that could only dishonour him. Such repugnance, to tell the truth, was hardly in line with his ordinary conduct, and he had certainly failed to feel it on many other occasions similar or worse. But just then, were it by calculation, were it illusion, he felt it as something touching the essence of his character and from it, as on the rebound, came an uncertain but determined intensification of his sense of honour. No, he could not abandon Andreina, to whom so many obligations tied him! Some men might do such things, but not he! That praiseworthy sense of loyalty, furthermore, found the strongest support in a philanthropic apprehension that the girl's whole behaviour seemed to justify. Would deserting her, when she was as deeply in love as that, not be tantamount, he wondered, to breaking her heart?

A mass of such considerations coursed through his head as, grave, distraught, worried, he sat motionless in a chair looking at Andreina, while she prattled and pranced about him, displaying a new gown she had bought and insisting that he say whether he liked it. Then it occurred to him that he could produce tangible proof of the sound basis to his repugnance by suddenly catching hold of her, seating her on his knees, and asking her whether she loved him.

Andreina answered that she did, with a certain babyish whimper that she playfully affected on occasion, throwing an arm about his neck, rumpling the little hair he had left with her caressing fingers, and dotting his middle-aged face with rapid, thickly strewn, and almost daughterly kisses. "How can Matteo think of asking such a question?" she concluded, using a pronominal style that she shared, at such moments, with children and South Sea Islanders. "Doesn't Matteo remember that before meeting Matteo Andreina was an innocent child, living at home with Andreina's mother and knowing nothing about anything? Well, being such a child and so ingenuous, how could Andreina ever have done what Andreina did if Andreina had not loved Matteo dearly?"

Now as regarded their intention, these little fibs should have flattered Matteo on the side of his vanity. Actually they filled him with a deceptive and presuming sense of remorse, which was the sort of remorse that he usually was filled with. And something of his state of mind must have appeared in the expression on his face, for in spite of her happiness the girl noticed something and, perking her lips in her babyish pout again, and affecting a drawling, halting speech to match, she whimpered:

"What is the matter with Matteo today? Why is Matteo so worried?"

"It's nothing," he replied, actually managing to force a smile. "I am not worried."

However, Andreina stuck to her affectionate whimper, and pressed:

"It is that bad wicked woman again?" and she snuggled to him and began to tug earnestly at the knot in his necktie. "Has she been making scenes with Matteo again?"

Matteo was not able to think up an evasion to that question. He answered tersely:

"No, she has not made any scenes. She has simply left home."

Quite to Matteo's surprise, by one of those incoherent caprices which were not infrequent in the girl, and which Matteo had never taken very seriously, regarding them as mere expressions of a nervous exuberant temperament, Andreina answered by bursting into a laugh, a prolonged joyless laugh that had an acid something about its uncontainable violence. "Left home! Left home!" she echoed again and again, as she caught her breath between her outbursts of mirth. But then she suddenly sat up, her amusement gone.

"You are not jesting? She has left home?"

Again surprised and no less worried, Matteo nodded, and after a pause he added:

"And I don't see that it's anything to laugh about."

Andreina sat on his knees looking blankly into space, as though in deep thought.

"Well, never mind!" she commented as the conclusion of her meditation. "Whether she is at home or away from home cannot matter much to you. Luckily, you have independent means, have you not?"

That was a sly question, and from the ill-concealed curiosity that overspread Andreina's face, it was apparent that she was not unaware of its slyness.

"No, I haven't!" Matteo was minded to reply, but partly from a sense of shame, and partly from a vague feeling of uneasiness which the girl's pointed curiosity aroused in him, he could not have told why, his courage failed him, and half-heartedly he agreed, masking his face with a blank expression.

"Yes, I am independent of her money. But that does not prevent this from being a most embarrassing situation."

Just as apparent on Andreina's face then had been the relief and the satisfaction that his answer gave her.

"Well, then! Well, then!" she cried almost gaily. "You don't care! You cannot care! Forget it! Snap your fingers at her! Besides, what ails your wife, anyhow? I'll tell you what: she needs a man. That's why she's always tormenting you. The moment she finds one, she'll be home again, and she won't bother you any more."

"Well, supposing we drop the subject of my wife," Matteo replied. He had never been able to accustom himself to the free, offhand language in which Andreina invariably dealt with her rival. But the girl pretended not to hear him and went on, still relieved but still cherishing a margin of doubt all the same:

"Of course it wouldn't have been so simple if you could not have done without her and she were in a position to name her terms. That not being the case, it is your sacred duty to snap your fingers at her. Your trouble, Matteo, is your good nature. You have far too much of it in dealing with certain people who have never been good for anything. Let her scream, let her froth at the mouth, let her stew in her own juice! You should be satisfied with knowing that at this moment there is someone who is very close to you, who loves you dearly, and will never stop loving you whatever happens."

To all of which Matteo, embarrassed, frowning, unable to forget the decision he and his sister had made and knowing well that he could not change it, found no answer at all. However, Andreina babbled gaily and volubly on, showing an unwonted animation, halting her chatter every so often to plant a kiss, now on his tight-pressed worried lips, now on his hard, wrinkled worried face, now, for the height of merriment, on his plain bald pate. Gradually, gradually, she turned the talk upon the dress she was wearing, and that led to mention of a certain party she would have liked to attend but couldn't for lack of a suitable gown to wear. Finally she allowed her naked arm to curl languidly about his neck and, drawing his head against her full youthful breast, she whispered in the familiar endearing whimper:

"May little Andreina ask something of Matteo? Yes or no?"

"Do, by all means!" Matteo said, smiling in spite of himself, and writhing in bewilderment between the delight of her caresses and the bitterness of his thoughts.

Whereupon Andreina applied her lips to his ear and whispered what a wonderful thing it would be if he would give her the money for the gown in question. Now Matteo did not have much money, and he was not sure that he could produce enough to buy the gown. He was not able to forget, furthermore, that his own position towards Maria Luisa was exactly the position of Andreina towards him. All that gave him an ardent impulse to reveal his whole ugly situation to his mistress. "I am not what you think I am," he was tempted to explain. "The truth is, I have nothing of my own. The truth is, I am as much of a beggar as you are." Convinced though he was that such a revelation would have made no difference in Andreina's devotion, a last remnant of shame again prevented him from speaking. Without saying a word, he took out his purse and gave her the few banknotes it contained.

Andreina tossed them upon the stand near by without counting them, having acquired from long practice such gestures of indifference for the things that concerned her most; and almost in the same movement she threw her arms about him and kissed him with a grateful and painstaking tenderness. Now all this allurement Andreina intended merely as a start towards a dutiful and scrupulous acquitting of the obligations she felt she had acquired towards her lover; but, probably because the thought of separating from her lent the girl a persuasive charm she never seemed to have had before, Matteo saw in her prolonged caresses only one more proof of the passion he thought he inspired in her, and, trying to hold her off, he could not suppress a wave of bitter regret at the decision he would be obliged to adhere to.

"Will you stop thinking of that woman!" Andreina cried, with a disappointment that had its margin of gaiety, as she rose, gathered up the banknotes from the stand, and went and stowed them away in a drawer. "That woman is better off than you are, and better off than I am."

Matteo returned no comment. Mute, thoughtful, he was trying to find the courage to begin.

"Listen, Andreina, I have something to say to you . . ."

But just then the door opened wide enough to admit the maid's head, as she announced Sofia's call.

At mention of his sister's name Matteo leapt to his feet in utter confusion. Andreina, however, was calmness itself; she evinced not the slightest surprise. Stooping a little to facilitate an attentive examination of her complexion in the bureau mirror, she commented, without turning around:

"Your sister telephoned me today to ask if she might call. Of course I said yes. . . . And you, of course," she added, glancing at him sidewise, with a mixed expression, "you, of course, knew that she was going to."

Matteo's confusion was caused less by his sister's disobedience and by her presence in that house than by his realization that now, in one way or another, whether from himself or from Sofia, Andreina was certain to learn of the decision they had reached. There could be no possible evasion any longer. If he did not speak, his sister would.

"No, I had no idea she was coming," he answered provisionally, as a way of gaining time.

But Andreina began to snicker, and, turning half-way around, she wagged a finger at him in playful menace, returning to her baby talk:

"Little Andreina knows that Matteo is a liar. A big, big liar! Matteo knew all about it, all the time!"

Andreina took off her shirtwaist and loosened her hair. The somewhat tilted mirror on the bureau reflected her image from the waist up, her broad white breast, so strong, so vigorous, her gorgeous curls now falling in a cascade upon her shoulders. She looked to Matteo like an incarnation of glorious youth.

"No, really I didn't. I had no idea, word of honour!" he repeated, in greater confusion still, if anything. For the time, indeed, was getting short. Should he tell her himself, or let Sofia do it? And besides, could it really be that he was seeing her for the last time?

"Matteo will not mind if Andreina does not care that much for his word of honour?" And snapping her fingers, she opened a drawer and selected another waist, and was putting her arms into the sleeves as she turned. She raised the garment to put it on and, as her rumpled head appeared through the hole in the neck, she repeated:

"Matteo does not mind?"

Matteo could not repress a smile at her impish mirth. He shook his head and countered, again with the idea of gaining time:

"Whatever gave you the idea that I knew of my sister's coming here?"

Andreina turned towards the bureau again, reached for her powder puff, and dipped it in its box. As she stood there with outstretched arm, she caught Matteo's eyes reflected in the mirror. She halted in that posture, looking at him attentively, her own face grave, expressionless. Then she smiled, took up the puff, and blew on it to remove the superfluous powder.

"Andreina knows her Matteo," she answered at last. From the very first she had understood that something was in the air.

Making no return, Matteo took a few aimless steps about the room, his head lowered in thought. He halted beside the stand at the head of Andreina's bed and gazed dreamily at a photograph of himself that the girl had placed there in a silver frame. An idea had suddenly occurred to him. There might be a way to keep his mistress and at the same time satisfy his wife! He turned suddenly with one of those hesitant and unforeseeable bursts of enthusiasm that were not infrequent in him, however laughably they contrasted with his timid middle-aged face.

"Whatever happens," he cried in a shrill heroic tone, stepping over to Andreina, "yes, whatever happens, darling, I am sure that our love will survive and become stronger than ever."

Andreina had been slowly powdering her cheeks. She stopped at that strange apostrophe and caught his eye in the mirror once more.

"Why, Matteo!" she cried, in her normal voice, with no trace of the baby talk now. "What is there that could happen?"

Matteo's bright idea had been that he might give both his wife and his sister to understand that he had left his mistress, but then secretly go on with her as usual, either at some new address or, with adequate precautions, even where she was then living. But even so, still to be solved was the problem that his sister's visit had created for him. Anybody else in Matteo's place would have said: "Sofia is here for such and such reasons. Pretend to humour her in everything." And that amount of frankness would have spared Andreina no end of misunderstandings and disappointments. But Matteo had never been a straightforward man. And then again he had a feeling that the time was too short for such an explanation, and there again was that same sense of shame which had kept him all along from confessing his real plight to his mistress. The simplest solution, therefore, seemed to be to leave to his sister the task of clarifying, indirectly, his tangled situation. That morning Sofia's interference had struck him as inopportune and in bad taste. In the light of his present emergency he found it almost providential.

In a burst of affection, born largely of his relief at seeing a way out, he caught Andreina in his arms and looked deeply into her eyes.

"Nothing unpleasant is going to happen!" he answered. "That I can guarantee. But listen to me now. You were right. I did know that my sister was coming here. She is coming to talk to you on matters that I haven't time to explain to you. But you, listen, without letting her know what you think, and agree without objection to anything she proposes. Afterwards I will explain everything to you, and we can plan accordingly. In fact, it would be better if I could see you immediately after my sister goes. Where shall we meet?"

Andreina mentioned a tearoom in fashion at the moment.

"Very well—there, at seven o'clock!" Matteo said, and not a little embarrassed at the incomprehensible rapture and admiration he could read in Andreina's face, he bent over and kissed her.

"I love you!" she murmured, favouring him with a tight clasp.

Engulfed in his remorse, too bewildered to think of a satisfactory answer, Matteo freed himself from her embrace and stepped out into the corridor; and brushing the curtain aside with a practised motion of his head, he stood before his sister in the anteroom.

For a time they looked at each other without speaking. They each had special reasons for their own particular embarrassment and could not decide just how to begin. In addition to the strange experience of finding his sister in his mistress's house, Matteo had the deception of his new subterfuge on his conscience, and had not had time as yet to think up reasons to justify it to himself. Besides, he was well aware of Sofia's inquisitorial gifts, her curiosity, her garrulousness, and her irresponsibility. What if she were to see through his game, betray him to Maria Luisa, and upset everything again?

Sofia, for her part, interpreted her brother's sheepish and suppressed demeanour as due to anger at her disobedience, and, now that she had to make actual use of them, she was by no means convinced of the validity of the excuses she had thought up during her drive. "He is in a beastly temper," she reflected, "and what an earful he will give me! Then that woman will come in at the right moment, and heaven and earth will fall!"

"Tell me the truth," she finally ventured, groping for an issue from the silence and trying to seem nonchalant. "I imagine you think it strange for me to be here."

"How keep her from pestering me with questions?" thought Matteo on his side.

"I do find it a little strange," he answered aloud, looking at the floor and teetering on his heels.

That evasive embarrassment Sofia again interpreted as overt hostility, and she resolved to take the offensive.

"When I want a thing, I get it in one way or another. I am sorry, Matteo, but I am very persistent."

"Yes, we all know that," he answered, but without irony, in fact almost in a tone of encouragement.

"I made up my mind," said Sofia, half defiant, half apologetic, "that I was going to meet this Caracci person. Now I have made up my mind to do something else. You can say and do anything you please, but I shall not leave this house till I have had a talk with her. So you had better stop sulking and make up your mind. If you like it, well and good. If you don't like it, well and good."

Her face flushed, almost breathless from excitement, frightened but at the same time pleased with her own daring, Sofia planted herself on the corner of the centre table with one foot off the floor, and sat looking at her brother defiantly. Her resolute disobedience fitted in too well with Matteo's new scheme for him to find any serious rebuttal. He affected even greater embarrassment than he actually felt, and made no answer. That was a disappointment to Sofia. Again she felt at a loss for words and could only look nervously about the room.

But then suddenly she got hold of herself and, her face brightening with a shrewd expression, she asked in her normal loquacious tone:

"Did you have the talk with Andreina?"

That was the first time, ever, that Sofia had referred to her brother's mistress by her first name, as she would have done with a member or a friend of the family; and Matteo thought she pronounced the word with a sort of deliberate intimacy as though to say: "Now at last I have a finger in your muddle too. Andreina is as much my property as yours." The thought annoyed him mightily. "One more nuisance on my hands!" he thought, and even with a tinge of jealousy. He had never confessed as much to himself, but all along he had been less troubled by the impropriety of an intrusion by his sister on the domain of his private affairs than by the thought that Andreina would be more than glad to meet his sister, and that the two women would eventually combine, as it were, against him. That would be the beginning of no end of talking and no end of trouble, and any real intimacy on his part with Andreina would be at an end.

"No, I have had no talk with her," he answered. "In fact, I was going to tell you. I have thought things over very carefully, and I have come to the conclusion that it would be better if you were to explain the situation to her."

The suggestion filled Sofia with utter enthusiasm. She leapt from her seat on the corner of the table, threw her arms about her brother's neck, and smacked a resonant kiss first off one of his cheeks and then off the other.

"You are an angel, Matteo!"

"No, I am not an angel," he answered, pushing her away, "and I am doing very wrong in allowing you to interfere in matters that in no way concern you. And I am wondering now," he added severely, "whether you can sit still a moment and listen to me."

"I am all ears," said Sofia, climbing back to her seat on the corner of the table.

Matteo kept his eyes to the floor, for fear lest his sister discover the revolting hypocrisy that he could feel oozing from his every pore.

"I did not speak to her, because I had no idea that you would come and I had decided to put the matter off for a time. But now that you are here, it's different—you can do the talking. However, there's one thing I wanted to say to you. You must not think you are dealing with a common vulgar person, with a woman, I mean, who does not have to be handled with a certain considerateness. Andreina is as good a person as there is in this world, and she may even be better than most. It's not her fault but mine if she is where she is. Now I am well aware that what you are going to say will hurt her—hurt her a lot—so I want you to be—how shall I put it?—be very careful, there!"

"But, Matteo!" cried his sister, bubbling. "What do you take me for?"

"Be as careful as you possibly can be!" Matteo continued. "You must state the situation with the greatest possible delicacy."

Matteo could feel his emotion taking the form of tears, and he was ashamed of them.

"Have you seen Maria Luisa?" he asked, in order to get hold of himself.

Sofia had obtained all she wanted and much more than she expected. She was willing enough to change the subject.

"Imagine!" she began in her garrulous tone. "What fun it was! A cold, empty house, with hardly a chair to sit on! It's almost too apparent that she can't keep that up very long and is just dying to be back with us again. She is staying away just on a point of pride. I got all that in a flash, and knowing how she is, and just to start her off right, I talked about Marietta and the party she is giving this evening. She turned green, blue, and red and pretended not to care in the least. Sour grapes, you know. But imagine how spiteful! You would never guess what she told me! She told me—crazy!—that Pietro had been making up to her!"

"Pietro?" echoed Matteo, amazed, but as though thinking of something else.

"Yes, Pietro! Now imagine Pietro! He never could stand her! With that beastly disposition she has? But she says yes. She says that Pietro has been pursuing her! Poor thing! You can see how hard up she must be for something to say!"

"But her answer!" said Matteo, impatiently. "What did she say?"

"She said no, of course," replied the sister, naïvely. "What else could she say? But wait and see if I'm not right. Another night of it, and she will be home again with us—I'll bet anything you say!"

Matteo made no comment. He merely glanced at his wrist watch, then walked around the table, picked up his coat, and began to put it on.

"We'll talk all this over by and by," he said. "I had better be going now. So—don't forget!"

And without waiting for an answer he went out into the hall.

Sofia heard the door close behind him.

IV

SHE did not have to wait long. Matteo had hardly vanished when, with a theatrical immediacy that suggested prearrangement, the same heavy red curtain through which he had appeared was drawn aside again to reveal in the doorway a tall handsome woman gowned entirely in a black glossy silk. She stopped a moment, smiled mysteriously, lowered her head, and then with a leisurely stately swaying of thighs and legs inside a tight-fitting skirt, advanced with affected humility to greet her visitor.

"Marchesa Tanzillo, I presume," she said in a tone conventionally hushed, extending a hand and looking up.

Sofia gazed at her in frank stupefaction. The face that was lifted toward hers under the cold light of the ceiling lamp was a dense oval, more like a boy's than a woman's, with soft, somewhat rounded cheeks, a straight sharp nose, thick lips cut in a straight line. It reminded one of a piece of warm ripe fruit on which someone had tried unsuccessfully to carve a woman's features. The eyes were large, and dim rather than not, though they had a peculiar eager liquidness as though they were about to weep, or as though their fixed and at times hard gaze had somehow been stopped and had melted into a mist of tears. In the detail the woman's features seemed to reveal a strange incompleteness, as though she were not a fully developed person; but the general effect, whether through her graceful figure or her affectedly careless carriage, was one of singular beauty, and since Sofia was not a pretty woman and was therefore unusually sensitive to charm in other persons of her sex, it did not take her long to perceive the ravishing grace of the girl before her. "And yet," she thought in her amazement, "who would ever have guessed it? Oh, now I understand Matteo's going wild over her!" And she continued to study the woman fixedly, as she offered her hand in return.

"This has been a very great and a very pleasant surprise," Andreina continued, in the same low tone, half whispering. "But we must go into the other room."

She pulled another curtain aside, and Sofia found herself in a little rectangular parlour where the walls were covered with an olive-green cloth decorated with a curious arabesquelike design that made it look like wallpaper. However, the peculiar thing about the room was the relative absence of furniture, apart from a mirror with a gilded frame and four chairs that were upholstered in the same material that covered the walls. Two of the chairs stood to either side of the door through which they had entered. The other two flanked a second door that opened in the longer side of the room; and in the wall opposite that door was a sort of indentation, or alcove, that was completely filled by a couch with a rumpled cover and pillows that were still unsmoothed, as though the person who had been lying there had just arisen.

Andreina turned on a dim little light in the alcove and then extinguished the central lamp in the ceiling of the room. She beckoned Sofia to a seat on the couch, upon which she climbed herself, nestling into a corner and drawing her legs up under her.

"So, then," Sofia began at once, "Matteo never told you that I was eager to make your acquaintance?"

"Never," said Andreina, shaking her head.

"I can imagine that," said Sofia thoughtlessly. "Of course he did not want me to. For the usual reasons—it was not the thing to do, I was his sister, and so on! But I am a persistent creature, and when I make up my mind to a thing, well, there aren't saints enough to stop me. So I kept at it, till here I am."

A moment's silence ensued. Then Andreina resumed, with the same exaggeratedly quiet tone:

"No, I knew nothing about it. I quite fell from the clouds, as one says, when I finally managed to grasp, over the telephone, that it was you who were talking. For many reasons, you see"—and at that she gave a little sigh and lowered her eyes—"I do not meet many people, and the last thing in the world I should have dreamed of would have been a visit from you. You cannot imagine, therefore, how pleased I am to see you. So—you have not been afraid to call on your brother's mistress!"

"What difference does that make?" cried Sofia, quite dazzled at finding herself in the role of the great lady calling on an inferior and, finding an even greater humility and deference than she had wished, trying to encourage her and put her at her ease. "What difference does that make? I was not thinking of that when I decided to call on you. I had heard so much about you that I really wanted to know you. That never once entered my thoughts."

"No," said Andreina, shaking her head with a bitter but complacent obstinacy. "I am your brother's mistress. There can be no disguising that fact. He provides me with everything, from this apartment here down to the gown I have on. Any woman who calls on me knows that she is calling on a man's mistress. . . . However," she added, with a cold rapid glance at the woman facing her, "the fact that you are paying me a call, especially in view of the position in which you stand towards me, is not the unimportant matter that you so kindly represent it to be. It bears witness to a kind heart, and to your generosity—for which I am truly grateful."

"We shall not get anywhere along that line," replied the other, shaking her head. "In the first place I was not thinking of one blessed thing in coming here. In the second place, don't go telling me that you are grateful for my kindness, generosity, and I don't know what else, because if you do I shall really be hurt, and instead of agreeing, as I hope we shall, we shall find ourselves quarrelling from the very start. No, no, and again no! I want you to treat me as you would treat anybody else who was paying you a call, no more and no less."

At that rebuke Andreina lowered her head and forced a laugh.

"In that case," she answered humbly, "you will at least allow me to say that, even taking you at your word, I am still delighted to have you call, since I am always alone."

"Always alone?" cried Sofia, looking at her in amazement, but as though she were thinking of something else. "What do you mean—always alone?"

"Always alone!" the other insisted bitterly. "I don't know a person in the world. Matteo, whether because he wants to have me all to himself or because he is ashamed of me—and I am inclined to think it is the second reason—Matteo, I say, has not only never wanted me to meet you—and in that he was not altogether to be blamed, for who was I, after all, to expect as much as that?—but he has tried to prevent me from knowing anybody. . . . And so," she concluded, lowering her eyes again, "this past year I have not seen a soul except Matteo. I have done nothing but read and go walking, all by myself. It has been a very sad year. After a time I became so lonely and discouraged that I could almost cry my eyes out. More than once I thought of going home again."

All that information awakened in Sofia, less the compassion it might have been expected to inspire, than a speechless stupor. She had always thought of people like Andreina as leading happy carefree lives. At the same time she did not fail to catch the appeal for sympathy that lurked in the girl's description of herself.

"Where is your family?" she finally asked.

Andreina looked at her and then lowered her eyes.

"In the country," she answered, cold, reserved. "I said," she added, after a pause, "that I thought of going home again, but that was just a way of saying. The truth is, I would never return home even if I found myself without a crumb of bread to eat. . . . My family," she concluded, melodramatically, "is dead, as far as I am concerned."

It was evident that Sofia was not particularly interested in the family, and as she sat there inattentive, distraught, Andreina resumed:

"Of late I have been making a few acquaintances, but with business people, for the most part. To tell you the truth, that is about the same as meeting nobody. They are so common, you see. Their tastes are so different from mine. It's impossible to become real friends with any of them."

Sofia had been looking at her with fascinated interest.

"Why is that?" she asked, with a start.

Andreina looked up and studied her for a moment. Then she answered:

"Because, with them, friendship is just a point of departure for achieving certain purposes—you can imagine what the purposes are. So when they see whom they are dealing with and that, though I am alone and have no family, I am not the sort of woman they took me for, they go away—and I find myself just where I was before."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why—the way I am here," said Andreina, arching her brows, pressing her lips tight, and then looking into her lap with an expression of heartbroken earnestness. Talking of herself and her unfortunate situation never failed to inspire her with a roily emotion. "This way, with nobody, with nothing, to lean on! Sometimes I feel as though I had reached the limit of human endurance. But then the days go by, one after the other, and I observe that I have lived them in spite of everything, so that what I had thought was the end was only the beginning, after all. I never say anything to Matteo—what good would that do? He has his own troubles. Besides, he wouldn't understand. So—all that I can do is to shut myself up in here and get along as best I can." At her last words her voice was shaking and she fell silent. Her eyes had filled with tears.

Sofia had not understood a word of all that, except that the girl was unhappy and had to be consoled.

"But you mustn't!" she exclaimed. "You mustn't! You must not let yourself be unhappy like that. Know what I do when things don't go right? I go to sleep. While I am asleep, something happens—I don't know what. Anyway, when I wake up in the morning, there I am cured and happy again!"

That profound philosophy touched no chord of thought in Andreina. She sat with her eyes still lowered. A moment passed in silence.

"Let's say 'thou' to each other," Sofia suddenly proposed, with the idea of saying something that Andreina would like, but also realizing that she was granting a good deal and perhaps more than she really ought. "I don't see why we should continue on a formal basis. Tell me . . ." She felt embarrassed at the question, but she was firmly resolved to learn something about the girl's relations with her brother. "Tell me—you are deeply attached to Matteo?"

Andreina thrilled with joy at the invitation to use the familiar form of address with her lover's sister, and it further awakened her calculating instinct, which had been all but stifled by her attack of self-pity.

"It seems so strange to be saying 'thou' to you," she said with a smile. Sofia noted the real glint of happiness in her expression though the sadness did not vanish from the girl's motionless eyes. "Why, ten minutes ago, we did not even know each other." She sat thoughtful for a moment, as though savouring the pleasure of that external mark of intimacy. "Am I deeply attached to Matteo, you ask?" There could be no doubt about the answer she should make, but she wanted to find words that would suggest a very special sort of attachment, the devotion of a wife rather than of a mistress, the sort of attachment that would set her in a good light before the sister's eyes and promote her conjugal ambitions. "Of course I love him—deeply, very, very deeply. But you see, the affection I have for him only partially consoles me for this life of sacrifice. It does him much more good than it does me."

"More good to him than to you?" Sofia repeated. But it was evident from her blank expression that she had not understood and was thinking of something else.

"Perhaps I didn't make myself clear," said Andreina, with a warmth that was designed to make a good impression on her visitor. "What I meant was that I am much more useful, much more necessary, to Mattec than he is to me. However painful it might be, I might get along without Matteo. As things stand now, Matteo certainly could never get along without me. When I first knew him, for many reasons that I shall not mention and which of course you know better than I, Matteo was depressed, disheartened. Well, what would another woman have done in my place? She would not have considered his state of mind—she would have treated him like any other man. I didn't. I understood that I was dealing with a special case, that he needed a woman who showed she believed in him, who encouraged him, flattering him if necessary, and who—the most important thing—spared him any complaints and let him believe she was altogether happy with just his love, a woman who loved him in renunciation and sacrifice, the way a wife or a mother would have done. And in fact"—at that point she smiled a sad, ironical smile—"I was not mistaken. Matteo came to depend on me, and before long was a wholly different sort of man. But that too is one of the reasons why I feel so alone. I never talk to him about myself. For one thing, as I said a moment ago, he would not understand; but then again I am sure that, if I ceased for one moment to be interested in him, he would cease to love me. You must not infer from that that I am dissatisfied. I am just stating the fact. Actually I am in love with Matteo and would do anything for him."

In all that Andreina had been almost completely sincere, her one misrepresentation having lain in ascribing a motive to her abnegation. She had said it was devotion, whereas really it had been interest. But her answer affected Sofia far otherwise than she had intended. Sofia had been pleasantly astonished at finding Andreina so different from what she had foreseen. She liked her and could not help comparing her with Maria Luisa, to the latter's thoroughgoing disadvantage. Not for an instant did it occur to her to doubt that her sister-in-law's wealth made her preferable, let alone to a mistress, to a wife far more beautiful and intelligent than Andreina was. When, therefore, she heard the girl say that "she would do anything for Matteo," to conclude that in that case she would be ready to let him go, for his greater happiness, was the matter of a flash. Andreina, she argued, probably realized the considerations of interest and propriety that stood against the continuation of such an ill-assorted relationship with a man so much older than herself and of such a different social station. So there would be no need of warnings or threats. All that she, Sofia, would have to do would be to talk to her as to a member of the family, or as to an intimate friend of the family, explaining the predicament from the family's standpoint, and sweetening the bitterness of separation with the sugar of a trust and a friendship to which the girl could never have aspired on any other basis. In that way everything would be ironed out amicably and by common accord.

Now that whole conception was quite of the kind to appeal to Sofia, in view of the role of the condescending lady which she saw herself playing in it; nor did she see any weakness in it on Andreina's side. Having thought of the girl in advance as the ordinary courtesan immorally greedy for money, she was now ready to credit her with any conceivable virtue, even the virtue of a renunciation so superhuman as to endow her with a close resemblance to a goose. She held her peace for the moment, however, not because she saw any flaw in her reasoning but because she remembered her brother's caution, and thought she should be on her guard against abrupt or indelicate broaching of the issue.

Andreina, on her side, thought she had made a fair start towards winning Sofia's sympathy, giving her a glimpse of an almost conjugal relationship, and emphasizing the indispensable character of her love for the brother. She did not feel quite ready, however, to go on to the question of an annulment of the marriage between Matteo and Maria Luisa, and kept wondering just what pretext she could find for launching that theme.

So they sat silent for a time, both of them nursing their respective dreams, but looking at each other with eloquent approval and with now and then a smile. Finally Andreina came to herself and rose to her feet.

"I must go and see if tea is ready," she said. "Excuse me."

And she was out of the room before Sofia had a chance to answer.

But the moment Andreina was alone and sure of not being seen, the conventional poise that she had assumed, in conformity with her notion of good manners in society, disappeared as in a flash, and she began as it were a dance of joy about the round table in the anteroom, throwing her legs sidewise to right and left with her fists digging into her sides. But her half-mannish face retained its expression of grim earnestness, as though the gaiety that was tugging at her body from the neck down were no concern of hers, though the joy began at the back of her head again, for there her hair rose and fell in a compact mass on her shoulders in rhythm with her body's motion.

Then suddenly the dance ceased as abruptly as it had begun. Andreina stepped in front of a mirror that was hanging on the wall near the door and examined herself attentively in it. "Little girl," she said to her image, "Sofia must absolutely become your best and dearest friend. You must make her love you. You must not let her get away." The mirror was an old one, with many scratches and rust spots on its dilapidated back. It seemed to reflect her image indistinctly as though from far away, making her look mysterious to herself, with a timeless beauty that seemed to be resurrected from some other world so that it troubled her and filled her with sadness. It seemed to be, not so much the image of her fitful mobile face, as the grim reflection of her deeper, more persistent thoughts, which, like a ghost, had become miraculously visible for an instant, but would soon grow dim among the scratches on the mirror's back and vanish utterly.

However, Andreina did not lose much time in this contemplation. Abruptly she turned her back on the mirror, made her way at a leisurely gait along the hall, and opened the door into the kitchen. That room was finished entirely in white and shone as brilliantly as a bath. A little kettle was steaming on the stove, and in a chair near by sat Cecilia, the much-painted and very engaging maid, buried deep in a novel.

"Well," cried the mistress, "how about the tea?"

The maid carefully marked her place in the book, laid it down on the cooling-shelf, and then arose.

"It's ready," she replied, lifting the cover of the kettle with the corner of her apron. "And tell me, signora," she added quietly, "who is that girl? She looks like someone that I have met, though I can't quite place her."

"It's the Marchesa Tanzillo," Andreina answered, with a sort of giddy levity, for her pleasure was tugging at her legs again, and she felt like breaking into song. "She is the sister of the Marchese Matteo."

"Oh, I see, his sister!" said the maid, taking the kettle from the stove and pouring the boiling water into the teapot that sat with the cups on a tray. "His sister—of course!"

"His sister! Yes!" Andreina repeated. "Let's dance!" And seized anew by her frenzy, she caught Cecilia by the belt and pulled her around, as the maid laughingly strove to defend herself. "It isn't every day that the marchese's sister is good enough to call on us! Don't you think we ought to do a step or two in her honour?"

They took each other by the shoulders and danced grotesquely around the tiny kitchen, colliding now with the walls, now with the table, now with a corner of the stove, the maid throwing herself about in a loose, vulgar hilarity, as though she were being tickled under the armpits, but Andreina with her face grim, joyless, almost hateful. Finally they stopped, exhausted, Andreina resting her weight on the lacquered cabinet, while the maid collapsed into a chair.

"Oh, signora," murmured Cecilia, pressing a hand to her chest, "that's pretty hard work!"

But Andreina's face had darkened as though a bitter disenchantment had taken possession of her spirit.

"Bring in the tea as soon as you can!" she commanded sharply. "And hereafter leave my perfume strictly alone! It's disgusting! One can smell you a mile away. The next time I catch you at that again, out you go a-running."

And leaving the woman to her astonished fright Andreina swept out of the kitchen.

She found Sofia with her cape thrown back, her hat off, pensively smoking a cigarette, with her eyes on the lamp in the alcove. Andreina's ill-humour vanished as if by magic. She forgot all about Cecilia and her petty pilferings and concentrated all her thought on her projects, and on the chances of carrying them out. She picked up a cigarette herself, lighted it with a studied nonchalance, seated herself comfortably on the couch, and looked across at Sofia with a smile that was half diffident, half grateful. There was a period of silence; then Andreina began, with a pretence at hesitation:

"I suppose you will say that I am interfering in matters that are no concern of mine, and that may well be. But anyhow, I haven't the courage to bring up the subject with Matteo, and since you are here and we may never meet again, I think I will take this opportunity. I wonder if I might ask you a question?"

Sofia had been framing in her own mind very much the same sort of speech, and she nodded encouragingly.

"Why not? I am here to listen. Go ahead!"

Andreina smiled bashfully.

"Yes, but you must promise not to judge me harshly or think I am playing some game. Really the only reason I have for asking the question is my love for Matteo and my sincere interest in him."

"But, my dear!" replied Sofia, altogether captivated by the girl's delicate approach. "I hope we are not going over that again, for really I shall resent it. Why all the apologies? I told you, didn't I, that you are to think of me as a friend?"

"Oh, you are right, a thousand times right!" said Andreina, laughing her joyless laugh. "But, you see, I can hardly realize, let alone that you are a friend, even that you are Matteo's sister, and that you are truly here calling on me." She paused a moment, while her face recovered its earnest expression. Then she concluded with a sort of chaste reserve: "Well, you see, what I want to know is this: Is it true that Matteo is thinking of getting an annulment?"

Now it had never even remotely occurred to Sofia that Andreina could be absurd enough, or ambitious enough, to dream of becoming Matteo's wife, nor had it ever occurred to her that her brother's quarrel with Maria Luisa could eventuate in anything other than a reconciliation. She therefore attributed the girl's question to that generic and affectionate interest which Andreina had been manifesting in anything that concerned Matteo, and she was highly pleased that Andreina herself had brought the conversation upon that difficult terrain.

"Well, speaking of coincidences," she babbled, thoughtlessly, "how is that for a coincidence! I was about to ask you a question in that same direction. . . . For that matter," she added in a confidential tone, "I might as well tell you that it was in order to ask it that I came here. Tell me—as you, for example, see things, should Matteo ask for an annulment, or shouldn't he?"

Andreina's heart began to thump violently and at double speed. Her breath came short and quick. A furious, an irrational hope took possession of her being. In vain she tried to check her emotion, telling herself that it could not be true. There were Matteo's declarations of love and his mysterious allusions to something that was about to happen. There again was all that she knew about Maria Luisa's flight from home. More than sufficient grounds to justify the wild speculations that she could not help making as to the purposes of this cordial and unexpected call from Sofia! "She came to tell me that Matteo is going to get an annulment and then marry me!" she thought. "What other reason can there be? Otherwise, why should she ask me that question, why should she be so affectionate, why, in short, should she come at all?" But suspecting that Sofia had put the question by design, in order to test her devotion to Matteo and sound her out, she thought it best to make an evasive reply.

"You ask me something that is hard to answer," she proffered, smiling. "And, furthermore, why do you ask it? What have I to do with the case?"

"I will tell you then," answered Sofia gravely, "that everything depends on you."

Under the shelter of the left arm that Andreina held across her chest, at the point where she could feel the mighty throb of her heart, the fingers of her right hand clutched desperately at her flesh.

"What do you mean—" she asked faintly, "that everything depends on me?"

"Why," said Sofia, "I mean that, according as your answer to the proposal I came to make is favourable or unfavourable, the annulment will or will not take place; in other words, Matteo will or will not straighten out his affairs—and it is high time he were doing so, if you ask me—will, in a word, be happy or unhappy." She carried the lie to that point for the effect that she thought it would have on Andreina. "But," she continued, "I hardly think I need explain more fully. I am sure you understand. Besides, before I came here today, Matteo must surely have made some allusion to the matter."

All this beating about the bush had come from Matteo's urgent pleading for caution just before he left her half an hour earlier. But Andreina, on her side, with her imagination galloping off far beyond the bounds of reality, could take Sofia's remarks only as so many delicate advances to the subject that was so close to her own heart.

"Yes," she confessed, "Matteo did make some reference to the subject, and when you telephoned I thought of it at once. It seemed to me, in fact, that your visit could be explained on no other basis."

Those words were tense with all the pent-up anxiety of a joy that was still not sure of itself, but Sofia interpreted them as fraught with a bitter embarrassment that was not yet entirely resigned.

"Fine!" she approved, with an encouraging nod. "You see? We understand each other perfectly. I need say no more, therefore. I will simply repeat that on your answer the whole happiness of Matteo depends."

There was a silence. Andreina had gained full self-confidence now, and her face bespoke the gratitude, the modesty, the discomfiture, of one who has been rewarded beyond her maddest hopes and is trying to seem appreciative of her good fortune and, within limits, to pretend unworthiness.

"Yes, yes," she said, lowering her eyes and smiling, "I can see that Matteo's happiness may depend on my answer, and it is to an extent comprehensible that he should have sent you here to talk to me, though he might just as well have asked me himself. What I don't understand and in some ways regret is that you could even have dreamed that I could answer in the negative."

Sofia had never doubted that in the end, whether in good grace or bad, Andreina would accept the painful proposal of a separation; but here she was, not only accepting out of hand but actually rebuking her, Sofia, for having been doubtful of the acceptance! In spite of her overweening optimism Sofia could not repress a start of utmost surprise, and almost of incredulousness. "Either this woman is a saint," she thought, looking at Andreina intensely, "or she is an idiot. The idea! Here I am proposing that she give up her man, and she agrees, and even passes the plate for a second helping! In her shoes I would have brought down heaven and earth, so I would." However, she judged it wiser not to emphasize her astonishment, but to encourage Andreina in her attitude, holy or half-witted as it might be.

"It is not for me to say anything," she ventured. "You can imagine whether I could ask for any better answer. Hardly! Still you must admit that I was justified in fearing that you might hand us a good flat no. After all, what has been asked of you is a great sacrifice, the greatest that can be asked of a woman's love."

Andreina could not see where the sacrifice came in. Marrying a marchese seemed to her about the easiest and most desirable thing in the world to do. However, she thought she ought to be appreciative:

"That's true, of course. One may think of it as a sacrifice. But in my case it isn't. I am sure I love Matteo enough to make that sacrifice, and even a far greater one."

"Talk about loving!" thought Sofia with an admiration that somehow could not master a sense of wonder and baffled scepticism. "I never met a love like this before, even in novels."

But Andreina was worried a little by Sofia's failure to make a ready reply. She was anxious to know the details of her great and unhoped-for good fortune.

"And you, Sofia—" she began with the timidity that she still judged appropriate to their very fresh relationship as sisters-in-law-to-be, "for you don't mind if I call you by your first name, do you?—are you really satisfied with my answer? You don't wish it had been different?"

"I?" replied Sofia, still in her own world. "Why shouldn't I be satisfied! Satisfied is putting it mildly! I have always been convinced that, appearances to the contrary, Maria Luisa and Matteo were just made for each other, if only for the pleasure of feeling themselves the victims one of the other. So—as satisfied as can be! I really couldn't ask for anything better."

Andreina had picked up a cigarette and was lighting it. At those words she stopped, grew deathly pale, took the lighted cigarette from her lips, and slowly pressed the end of it into the ashtray. Meanwhile, her eyes were fixed on space in front of her and, in a semi-darkness, she could see the flat curls of the arabesques on the wall-hangings melt one into the other in a slow movement that gradually became a dizzy whirl. She could feel the blood receding from her cheeks, and all that kept her from falling was her grip on the cigarette. She pressed it harder and harder into the ashtray, and it seemed to sink into the metal as into butter. Then suddenly she felt a burning sensation; she drew back her hand with a start, and there was her little room again, empty, half in darkness, and there was the lamp, and Sofia sitting under it at her side on the couch, her face illumined by the circle of light.

"The only thing I am not sure of," she finally managed to say, "is that this consent of mine can mean Matteo's happiness."

Sofia shrugged her shoulders, and answered in her garrulous tone:

"Perhaps not his happiness—what is happiness, anyhow? And who is ever happy? But one thing is certain: You are restoring peace and quiet to our family, and not only peace and quiet—something else more important than that—money!"

"Money?" asked Andreina. "How is that? You don't mean to tell me Maria Luisa is supporting Matteo?"

From the very day of Matteo's marriage, and to show how little regard she had for her sister-in-law, Sofia had been in the habit of explaining brazenly, to anybody who asked, all the considerations of material interest that had prompted her brother to marry such a frump.

"That," she laughed, "is exactly what I mean to tell you. The truth and nothing but the truth! Maria Luisa has been and is supporting us—all of us. Maria Luisa will supply the dowry the day I marry. Give Matteo and me a good shaking down, and you won't loosen a penny! If it weren't for that," she added, imprudently, "do you suppose I would be so concerned about this business?" She made an expressive gesture that seemed to mean: "I hope you don't think me such a goose."

Just then the curtain across the room drew aside and Cecilia appeared, holding up a well-laden teatray with both hands. Motionless, buried deep in her corner, her lips half opened and slightly quivering, her forehead knit in a frown, Andreina was looking into her lap and seemed not to notice the appearance of her maid. One by one Sofia's words were making their way into her stunned and anguished brain, and one by one the soaring ambitions, which of late, and more especially after Maria Luisa's flight from home, had matured in her, were falling to earth like dry leaves blown by some hell-born wind. "Oh, now I see," she was saying to herself, understanding everything at last. "That was what she came for! To ask me to give up Matteo, so that he wouldn't lose his wife's support. And Matteo, the coward, the liar, has not a penny of his own! And instead of marrying, having a home and being a marchesa, I must go out and find another man to look after me, and after that another, and so on to the last!" Now to her bitter disappointment and her surging hate for Matteo, liar and beggar in one, was added a sullen and deep-seated dislike of Sofia, as though the girl had deliberately and maliciously nursed her baseless hopes, as though she herself had not been the one to draw from the marchesa's call all the inferences that best suited her hopes. "And this idiot here," she continued vengefully, "comes here to waste my afternoon. All honey, oh, yes! Let's say 'thou' to each other. We must be good friends! We must trust each other! Oh, yes! And all the other rot! And we know why! Because she had no other place to go this afternoon! Because she wanted to kill time at my expense! Yes, that too they do to me!" But just as a beggar who has been dressed up as a tinselled king for an hour creeps back into his rags with a certain sense of relief and satisfaction, so Andreina, who had been dreaming madder and madder dreams from the day of Maria Luisa's flight, found a certain familiar comfort in returning to her grim but unexacting hopelessness. "I have been a fool," she concluded finally, "a fool to imagine that things could ever be better or different, a fool to trust Matteo, a fool to see this idiot here. I should not have! It serves me right—I deserve worse!"

She sat there in the same attitude, her eyes downcast, her chin pressed against a stiff straight neck. She seemed to be studying the brooch that glistened on her waist. Really her hazy eyes were fathoming and refathoming the murky and bottomless abyss that now yawned before her, in place of a structure of definite splendrous hopes that Sofia's revelations had destroyed. The corners of her thick lips drooped in two lines that ran through folds in her skin all the way to her throat. She had lighted another cigarette, and it hung from her lower lip, visibly trembling. Every now and then a great chill would run the length of her folded burning legs and course through her body. Some moments passed that way. Then she thought she heard talking, but could not grasp the meaning of what she heard. She looked up. Sofia had risen and was helping the maid arrange the tea things on the stand.

She understood that, as hostess, she should have risen and poured the tea herself. But she remained where she was, partly in a sullen reflection that any politeness she showed Sofia would be so much wasted courtesy, partly because she was too stunned to find the energy, partly from sheer indolence. She followed the movements of the two girls with blank, uncomprehending eyes. Having arranged the teapot, the cups, and the saucers on the stand, Cecilia left the room, and Sofia returned to the couch, sitting down somewhat closer to her.

"Don't get up," said the girl, removing her gloves and bending over towards the stand. "I will pour. Will you have yours strong or weak?"

Sofia was anxious to show that the attainment of her purpose had in no way diminished the cordiality of their relations, but her attentiveness only aggravated the fixed and loathing disgust which Andreina had now come to feel for her presence. "Why doesn't she have sense enough to get out?" she thought. "Pouring tea for me!" However, Andreina did not speak, and without betraying any of the thoughts that were raging through her head, she took the cup that was offered her, then, choosing a piece of cake from the plate that Sofia extended, began to eat it slowly, with an indifferent, abstracted air. Some moments passed in silence. Crumbs of cake fell from Andreina's dry and tortured lips into her lap. The cup tilted in her hand and the tea spilled into the saucer. She did not notice or care. She sat with her eyes glued to the red shade of the lamp in the alcove.

This mute and uncontrollable despair at last struck Sofia's attention.

"What's the matter?" she asked, setting her cup on the table and looking around. "What has happened? You seem different."

"I was just thinking," answered Andreina faintly, hardly articulating her words.

Sofia picked up her cup and took a generous swallow.

"Of yourself?" she asked, remotely. "What are you thinking?"

She saw Andreina lift a pale and anguished face towards her, while the eyes gazed at her fixedly.

"I was thinking," Andreina murmured again, "of how wretched I am."

"Oh, we are all wretched," answered Sofia, philosophically, emptying her cup, setting it on the table, and wiping her lips with the napkin. "Why you in particular? Does it hurt you to give up Matteo?"

Andreina shook her head and made no answer. Sofia could not fathom the girl. She waited a second and then prompted:

"Well, what, then?"

"Then, nothing!" said Andreina, obstinate, subdued.

Sofia sat looking at the girl, mystified, unable to guess the reason for the change in her. Then suddenly a light dawned, and she all but clapped a hand to her forehead. "Of course!" she thought. "And what a dunce I was not to think of it sooner! Of course! She's worried about her future. With Matteo she loses her living. She has no reason to be gay! And it's only fair, too! The moment Matteo is able, he should do something really generous for a girl he has left stranded!" However, Sofia was afraid of hurting Andreina's feelings and did not dare broach the subject. Instead she followed the other line:

"Nothing? But you wouldn't seem so worried, so despondent, over nothing!"

Andreina's mind was lost in a dark bewilderment. For a second she was tempted to answer frankly, confess to Sofia all her hopes and ambitions, her disappointment, her dismay, surrender, in a word, to that sort of cowardice that in her had always replaced a disinterested need of friendship and confidence. But then, perhaps owing to a sense of pride, perhaps because she was still holding Sofia responsible for the terrible crash of her hopes, she took refuge in her sulk. Slowly she raised her eyes upon her visitor and considered her coldly.

"I am not worried about anything," she said, deliberately. "And I am by no means despondent."

They looked at each other. Sofia was more than ever convinced that Andreina's new mood depended on considerations of a practical nature, yet still she could not bring herself to mention them. She thought, in fact—and in so thinking she felt that she was probably being too considerate and tactful—that after obtaining such a portentous advantage, and one so hard for an antagonist to yield, to go on lightly to talk of money, and such things, would be like offering a humiliating and insulting assent to Andreina's discouraged conviction that she was and could be nothing better than a mistress to some man. Anyway, Sofia concluded, all the practical side of the separation was something for Matteo to attend to; or indeed she might attend to it herself, but later on, when all hurts had been healed, and a better acquaintance and a more trustful intimacy had made frank talking easier—unless, of course, Andreina should see fit to bring up the question meantime.

Sofia decided, however, to make one last effort.

"And yet," she pressed, with a doubting expression, and shaking a warning finger at the girl, "you are hiding something from me. You cannot deny that your manner has changed. Before your maid came in with the tea you were not, or, if you prefer, you did not seem to be, so despondent."

"There has been no change," replied Andreina, without varying her fixed, cold, inexpressive stare.

"At the very least, you were more talkative."

"I have said all I have to say."

"Well," thought Sofia, "if she won't talk, so much the worse for her!" But whether out of a sudden inspiration, or because she enjoyed playing to its very limit the role she had assumed, it occurred to her to make a gesture which, as she judged, would give conclusive proof of her unaltered cordiality. She stretched out her hand, took Andreina's chin between her thumb and forefinger, and shook it playfully.

"Shall I believe you, or shall I conclude that you do not trust me?"

Andreina all but choked from her unexpressed rage. "What right has she got to doubt what I say? Who told her she could lay hands on me?" She raised her eyes and looked straight at Sofia.

"I was not lying," she declared in a cavernous voice.

Sofia felt very much like a person who has tweaked the ear of a dog, only to receive a snarl in return. Disconcerted, almost frightened, she finished off with a caressing brush of those two pretty pouting cheeks, and then rose with a deep sigh.

"Well, I suppose I must be going."

"Going?" echoed Andreina, without however expressing either wonder or regret.

With a lazy, bored manner, as if Sofia were being a great nuisance by compelling her to rise to attend her to the door, she wriggled to the edge of the couch, got her feet to the floor, and stood up. Slowly, side by side, they made their way to the door. Tall, with a slightly careless droop to her shoulders, Andreina kept her eyes to the floor, as though in fear of tripping over something. Actually her mind was a blank and there was a clutch at her throat. She had only one desire left—to be alone. Sofia's state of mind was wholly different. Satisfied as she was with the results she had obtained, she could not help feeling sorry for Andreina, and so was anxious to do or say something that would console the poor girl a little, and at the same time assure her own conscience that she had done her full duty and more besides. She suddenly remembered that early in their talk Andreina had lamented being so much alone and having so few acquaintances. If she could help her a little along that line, she could surely feel that she had done everything possible. But whom could she send to her? No one certainly from among her friends or from her society! It would have to be someone intimate enough with her, and enough of a stranger to her circle, not to talk of Andreina's situation or even to notice it. The only person she could think of was Pietro Monatti—he was almost a member of the family and he was not a member of her set. Yes, Pietro! Pietro might do!

They were in the hall. Andreina took Sofia's umbrella and handed it to her at the door.

"Thanks, then, for your call," she began slowly, with her hand on the knob, holding the doormat in place with the tip of her shoe.

"Why, the idea!" answered Sofia, impatient in her effort to think fast. "By the way, you were complaining of being so much alone, of not knowing anybody. Would you not like to meet a few interesting, attractive people? I wonder if you would care to see a friend of mine—Pietro Monatti, a newspaperman? He knows hosts of people about town and might be very useful to you."

Andreina had listened, more annoyed than interested, with her eyes still downcast and her hand on the knob. But at the name Monatti she looked up.

"Pietro Monatti?" she asked. "Isn't he your fiancé?"

"Yes," answered Sofia, blushing in spite of herself. "Why? Do you know him?"

Andreina shook her head.

"Not really. We were in school together once upon a time. In those days I saw a good deal of him. Later on I lost sight of him. But I shall be glad"—and she smiled coldly, incomprehensibly—"very glad, to see him again."

"Fine!" cried Sofia, taking the girl's smile in good part. "That means that I shall bring him here myself. Now let's see: tomorrow I am busy all day, and day after tomorrow. But Friday I am free. How about Friday?"

"Friday will do very well," said Andreina.

"So it's Friday!" repeated Sofia, and then, of a sudden impulse, she added: "Now give me a kiss!"

The final line in a comedy that she had played to the end! Wholly within her role, she uttered it with the actress's sincere emotion, and she thought that such a final and such an amiable gesture ought to stir Andreina too. But cold, inert, Andreina took a kiss on either cheek. She did not return them, nor did she lower her hand from the door. In fact, as she extended her head for the parting caress, with a slow patient twist of her wrist she was turning the knob. They drew apart. The door opened. Sofia waved a gay farewell with her gloved hand, crossed the threshold, and disappeared into the darkness of the thickly grown garden.

V

PIETRO MONATTI found that his discomfort at discovering Maria Luisa's bad opinion of him was somehow intensified and unpleasantly complicated by a fear lest the angry woman might have got her revenge by telling Sofia of his infidelity. Now both those feelings were the more irksome to him in that their presence seemed hard to explain in the innocent soul he was convinced he was, however natural they might be in the ambitious self-seeker that Maria Luisa accused him of being. He would have been altogether willing to shake them off. But however deftly he sought to repress them or explain them away, the keener grew the discomfort and the more disquieting the fear. "A pretty fix I'm in," he said to himself, as he fidgeted at Maria Luisa's side in her automobile. "If I show that I am worried at anything this witch of a woman may or may not have said to Sofia, she will seize such a good opportunity to tell me that I have a dirty conscience, that I am afraid my engagement has fizzled, that my fears are the measure of my selfishness—and that is only half of what she will say. But yet, how can I go on in this state of uncertainty?"

Past the windows of the automobile he could see lines of suburban houses flitting, and a procession of wheezing taxis and used cars that were being outrun by the powerful engine of Maria Luisa's limousine. He realized that their drive would soon be finished and that, if he were ever to speak, he must do so immediately. But there sat Maria Luisa in her corner with her face turned away from him. He felt that she had become even more glowering and hostile since Sofia's call, and that the best he could expect from her would be a rebuff as gallingly bitter as she could make it. However, mustering all his courage, he finally began, affecting a casual, offhand manner:

"By the way, Maria Luisa—how did your visit with Sofia go? What did you talk about?"

The approach could not have been more awkward or more disastrous. Maria Luisa turned and looked at him. "He's afraid!" she thought. "He's afraid—and he's trying to make sure that I did not tell on him." A wave of intense and all-embracing disgust swept over her. She did not analyse that far, but the feeling was due, not so much to the rancid selfishness that she ascribed to the young man, as to the indifference to her that his question implied. There she was, prey to an uncontrollable panic, unable to decide what to do or where to turn next, whether to accept or refuse her husband's offer, whether to return to society or hold aloof from people! There was life escaping from her hands! And he sat there stolidly, stupidly thinking of himself, with not the remotest perception of her or her situation!

"To tell the truth," she countered, "you are in one blessed stew for fear I may have told on you. Confess now—isn't that what's worrying you?"

Pietro could see her excited eyes glaring in the dark, and her unhappiness and vengefulness showing in equal proportions on her painted face.

"Supposing it were true—though not for the reasons you see fit to imagine!" he replied in a tone of distressed anxiety. "Did you tell her or did you not?"

Maria Luisa knew the art of being graciously unpleasant, a natural talent that her social experience had brought to high perfection. She answered slowly, with a quiet, calculated iciness:

"Yes, I told her. Of course I told her. I thought it was my duty to tell her. If you are bent on having the full truth, I gave her my frank opinion of you, and assured her that in her place I would break off the engagement at the earliest possible moment." She paused, studying the effect of her words on Pietro's desperate face. "Is that enough, or is there something else you would like to know?"

What hurt Pietro most and was hardest for him to bear was not that Sofia should have learned of his indiscretion—he thought he could manage that difficulty quite easily. It was the hopeless opinion, the final and conclusive contempt, that Maria Luisa seemed to have for him. He tried to tell himself that she was sincere; yet profoundly convinced as he was of his own innocence, he could not help thinking that there was a certain amount of pretence in her hatred, and that her animosity was based more on a vengefulness born of pique than on a basic dislike.

"Why did you do that?" he finally managed to ask.

"Why did I do that!" she repeated, proudly arching her eyebrows. "Why, my dear Pietro, because I thought it would be amusing to. That strikes one as a sufficient reason, doesn't it?"

Pietro drew himself back into his corner, his eyes narrowed in pain.

"So," he said faintly, "you are still convinced that I am a climber, and nothing else?"

"Convinced!" she replied treacherously. "Dear me, how could I help being? You, my dear Pietro, seem to be doing everything possible to prove it, and nothing to show the contrary."

He bowed his head.

"And yet you are wrong," he said nervously, "and you wouldn't be talking that way if"—he hesitated and then resolved to finish—"if what happened this afternoon had happened differently."

"What would that be?" she asked, surveying him theatrically.

Pale, spiteful, Pietro decided to be brutal:

"If I had accepted, instead of refusing!"

The words had a far different effect than he could have foreseen. Maria Luisa's proud reserve—frail restraint to an uncontrollable temper—suddenly gave way, as the reality of her situation was brought before her in its whole ghastly extent. Her eyes filled with tears, a defenceless feminine weariness came over her, along with a seething hatred for the man at her side. Pietro was astonished to see her lean forward and begin to knock frantically on the glass behind the chauffeur. Then turning towards him, panting, and pulling him by the sleeve, she said: "Now you get out! Be so good as to get out at once! I have had enough of you."

Pietro sank deeper into his corner, prey to a veritable terror.

"No," he begged, "no, Maria Luisa! Please! I did not intend any offence. Besides, no scenes in public!"

The woman seemed not to hear.

"Get out!" she repeated, trying to force him from his seat with one hand, and to open the door with the other. "I ask you to get out. If you don't, I shall."

She observed by that time that the car had not stopped. Releasing her hold on Pietro's arm, she knocked again on the glass window. The automobile slowed down. "Now, perhaps, you will get out!" she panted, again pulling him by the sleeve. "Oh, yes, you will, that's certain!"

Paralysed by the spectacle of such great fury, and by the abject wretchedness that he foresaw in what was about to happen, Pietro did not move and did not speak. A few yards farther along the car came to a complete stop. Pietro sat where he was, looking now at Maria Luisa, now through the window at the humiliating sidewalk on which he would soon be forced to alight. However, more concerned to avoid a scandal than actually resigned, he was drawing himself up to pretend a cordial leave-taking of the enraged woman, when the chauffeur appeared at the open door.

"I did not stop," he explained, "because number seventy-five is really here, and not where you first knocked." And he motioned with his doffed hat towards a building with a large arched entranceway.

Pietro understood that by a fortunate chance they had reached the address of Maria Luisa's brother, and he turned towards her with a sigh of relief and an expression that bespoke a sort of sheepish triumph.

". . . Since we are both getting out . . ."

But Maria Luisa was bending over, and already had one hand on the door. She paid no attention to him.

"Next time," she said sharply to the chauffeur, "be so good as to stop when I tell you to."

And without attending to the frightened apologies of the puzzled driver, she leapt from the car. Pietro got out in his turn and hurried after her.

Against a pitch-black sky, to either side of the avenue, tall flat-roofed apartment houses rose in lines, one adjoining the other. The numerous floors were distinguishable in the night by the rows on rows of lighted six-paned windows, many of which were without curtains or blinds, so that, from the street, one could see bits of wall, papered cheaply in red or green, or stretches of naked ceiling, with now and again a centre chandelier. The sidewalks were lined with wine shops, grocery stores, haberdasheries of the cheaper grade, most of them with a single show window. They, more than the monotonous architecture of the buildings, or the anonymous lines of lighted windows, gave a certain atmosphere of commonness to the district as an abode of poor but respectable inhabitants.

Maria Luisa's car had stopped in front of the yawning arch, and she hurried through it, followed by Pietro but disregarding him, as she might have done with a stranger, excluding him from all that she was doing. However, this was her first visit to the place, so that half-way through the passage she stopped, perplexed. At the end of the vaulted entranceway a courtyard opened, and from what one could see in the darkness it was very large—more like a park than an inner court, since it had trees, flowerbeds, fountains. To either side of the vaulted passage two entrances opened, and visible through them were identical stairways, with the same inadequate lighting, the same gloomy bareness, the same schematic balustrades. Against the walls, just inside the doors, were forbidding brass cases of mail boxes in three tiers, the swarms of names giving a discouraging sense of the population of the building, and of the difficulty of finding one's way about.

Anxious to be helpful and to win forgiveness for his inconsiderate words, Pietro stepped to Maria Luisa's side.

"What number was it?" he inquired.

She had the address written on a piece of paper in her hand. She looked at it, ignoring his offer with the ostentatious indifference one might show to an annoying beggar, then, without a glance at him, made for the lighted doorway of the janitor's room.

The place was empty. A striped cat of the commonest pedigree was curled up asleep on a cane-seated chair. On a small table in front of the chair, as lonely and symbolical as a king's crown on its cushion, lay the visored hat of the doorman.

"Janitor!" called Maria Luisa in a loud voice, though it was evident that the janitor had no quarters except that empty room.

And in fact her call had no other effect than to awaken the cat, which opened its eyes, looked at her for a second with a knowing, surprised expression, and then went to sleep again.

"The janitor is nowhere about," said Pietro, from the doorway. "What number are you looking for?"

Again the woman paid no attention but, turning her back, made resolutely for the stairway on the left.

They began the ascent. Pietro was almost choking with the angry and humiliated anxiety that seemed to concentrate in his throat. He felt he had to make another effort:

"Maria Luisa, answer me! You are unfair! I admit it was rude of me to say what I said. I should not have said it, had I not been terribly hurt."

Maria Luisa climbed on, slowly, her body erect, leaning heavily on the banisters and looking straight ahead. She made no answer.

"You are unfair," Pietro continued to plead. "There can be no doubt about it. You have a real grudge against me."

Still she ignored his words and his presence, and, boiling with rage and mortification, he decided to say no more. They climbed on. The wide, absolutely naked stairway echoed frigidly under their tread. Pietro knew apartment houses of that sort. He had passed his childhood and a larger part of his youth in just such an environment. There was the usual iron balustrade, crude and summary as a prison grating. There was the same grey, vaguely glossy finishing with lighter veinings, designed to make plasterboard look like marble. There were the same dimly lighted landings with china spittoons in the corners. There were the same pompous and insipid name plates of polished brass, the only decorations on the black varnished doors. But instead of filling him with the homesick emotions that the scenes of a happy childhood often inspire in grown people, these familiar details depressed and angered him. Whether from the poverty of his parents or the vulgarity of the surroundings in which they had lived, his early years had been the worst in his life. He could feel only a bitter resentment for that vanished period, and a great pity for the pallid faraway creature he then had been. The depressing aura of these reminiscences of his past self was intensified by the contemptuous scorn of the woman who was climbing the stairs ahead of him. "I should like to know," he thought, "how a person born and reared in a place like this, and among such people, could help growing up selfish and ambitious. Maria Luisa and all those rich snobs who think I am a climber do not realize, or at least seem to overlook, the sort of things I had to put up with down to the time I was twenty years old. I am not a climber, but after spending a boyhood in such places I would almost have a right to be." In his hatred of his defamers and his pity for himself he would have liked to seize Maria Luisa by an arm and force her to admit the soundness of his case. And he might well have done so had not an unexpected clamour suddenly broken loose on one of the floors above. A door opened noisily. There was a scurrying of footsteps as someone ran upstairs and an angry woman's voice began to call after the fugitive:

"Luciana-a-a!"

The word echoed bleakly down the winding stairway as in a tunnel.

On the landing at the top of another flight of stairs they came upon a woman who was leaning over the balustrade and looking up to the flights above. She was a person of middle age but who looked older than her years. She was wearing a grey frock-apron with the sleeves rolled up around her naked arms. On hearing their approach she straightened up and looked at them with a tired diffident expression.

"If you please," said Maria Luisa, as she drew abreast of the woman, "where do these people live?"

And she showed the piece of paper in her hand. The woman read the name, pointed to one of the doors on that very landing, and then gave one last angry, resonant call:

"Luciana-a-a!"

No answer came. She turned, crossed the landing, ran on up the next flight of stairs and disappeared.

The name plate to which she had pointed read: "Cav. Prof. Renato Malacrida." Maria Luisa pushed the bell, and the two of them stood waiting in silence in front of the closed door. But in terror again of being humiliated in the presence of the person who was to open, Pietro made one last effort at reconciliation:

"Why are you so cruel to me, Maria Luisa?"

To his surprise she turned and answered, hurriedly:

"Do you wish to give me a proof of your pretended friendship?"

"Of course I do," said Pietro, amazed.

"Well, do not tell my brother that I am living alone. Act as though I had never left home and were quite reconciled to Matteo. That is all I ask. If you cannot do that much for me, do not complain if you are treated as you deserve."

The tone of that remark too had seethed with her angry contempt. Worse humiliated if anything, Pietro started again to protest. But he did not have time to speak. The door opened.

VI

AT FIRST Pietro saw nothing but a black rectangle, then a corridor, and under the doorknob a little girl, perhaps eight years old. The child was wearing a short white dress, rather soiled. Her dark palish face, unhealthy, unbeautiful, had bright black eyes that were too large and too expressive for features so wan. A white ribbon, no less rumpled than her dress, was dangling from her hair.

"May I see Signor Davico—Signor Stefano Davico?" asked Maria Luisa, pronouncing her syllables distinctly, and bending over towards the child with a graciousness that Pietro thought put on. "Is Signor Davico in?"

"He is," said the child,. who seemed not at all bashful. "You know the room?"

"I am sorry—no. Which would it be?"

"The last, at the end of the hall." And the child stepped to the wall and pulled the chain on a lamp.

In the faint yellow light the two visitors saw a narrow corridor papered in green, with bookshelves along the walls. The far end was marked by a closed door.

"The door at the end there—I see," repeated Maria Luisa, who seemed almost frightened at the appearance of the place. Hesitant, irresolute, she entered the apartment.

Now that the door into the stairway was closed, one could hear, in the choked silence of the apartment, the faint discordant thrumming of a stringed instrument, a guitar perhaps. Maria Luisa shrank back in instinctive fright as a side door along the corridor was suddenly thrown open, a man's head appeared, and a voice called:

"Who is it?"

"Someone to see Signor Davico," answered the child, showing the visitors the way. The door at the end of the hall was not closed. It had merely swung to. Maria Luisa pushed it and went in.

The room that opened before the visitors was surprisingly large as compared with the long narrow hall that led to it, and it was surprisingly unattractive. The bed, the dresser, the table, the chairs, were arranged not in such a way as to furnish the room, but in lines around the walls, the way a drawing-room might be cleared for a dance. A large area of floor was thus left empty in the centre of the room, which was everywhere dark, except for a space near a window that was draped with a pair of those faded and rotted lace curtains that tear from top to bottom with a dry, dusty, ripping sound the moment one sets out to draw them aside. Near the window were a chair and a sofa. Two crutches were leaning against the chair, and on the sofa, fully clothed, lay a youngish man, between twenty-eight and thirty-five. He was holding a guitar. From it came the thrumming that they had heard outside. He played with a surfeited, resigned air and as though his mind were on something else. There was but one light in the room. It was in the centre of the ceiling, but an automatic movable lamp, with a brass weight to balance it, and a shade of burnished metal, had been attached to the same outlet, and the man had pulled it over to the chair and fastened it with a string, setting the shade perpendicularly, so that a bright circle of light was cut on the wall, illumining only the sofa and the tattered curtains on the window. The distribution of light, the strange ordering of the furniture, the idle thrumming of the guitar, all combined to impress the visitor with an atmosphere of incredible squalor and dreariness.

On hearing sounds at the door the man broke off his playing and looked curiously around. He seemed unable to believe his eyes. He reached for a pair of glasses that were lying on the sofa beside him, adjusted them to his nose, then looked again. Finally, manifesting all the signs of sincerest joy, he laid his guitar aside, hitched around on the sofa, lifted himself to his elbows, and cried:

"Maria Luisa! You! At last! Come here! Let me look at you! Give me a kiss, my poor Maria Luisa! You cannot imagine what a pleasure it is to see you again after all that has happened."

Stefano had delivered that series of exclamations in a false, mannered voice that was nevertheless glib and fluent. It was as though the affectation were a habit with him and not the device of the moment. Pietro looked at him. He was a thick-set person with a yellowish, unhealthy, bloated skin, large black motionless eyes, heavy eyebrows tinged with red. The keen delicate linings of his face seemed to have been engulfed by the fat that had heaped around them. If for nothing else, by the unctuous affectedness of his manner, Maria Luisa's brother reminded one of a monk who was a libertine by temperament and a saint by necessity. At that moment especially, his squatty neck left bare under the open collar of his sport shirt, his black curly hair that formed a thick frame about his rather high forehead, the big round glasses he had on, accentuated the resemblance.

If Stefano's welcome was—sincerely or insincerely—cordial, Maria Luisa's demeanour was quite the opposite. She had not seen her brother for five years, and what struck her most strongly at first was his unhealthy appearance, the air of a person who has grown resigned to the life of an invalid, is satisfied with his condition and perhaps unaware of it. As she studied him, she remembered what he had been like in his earlier years, so slender of figure, so bright of mind, with a freshness of sentiment and a brilliancy of intelligence that had seemed to promise a distinguished future. She could not help remarking, with astonishment not unmingled with disgust, the great change that those few years had wrought in him. He was evidently the same Stefano he had been of yore, but how much older, how flabby, how fat!

Her stupor lasted for a few seconds at the most, but the flash was long enough for her cruel harshness, whetted by her disgust, to take in a hundred ugly and depressing details about the room that would have escaped a more indifferent eye: the broken marble top on the dresser that stood against the wall opposite the window, the patches on the white cotton spread that covered the iron bed, the dirty water in the washbowl on the commode, the soiled towel that hung on a hook near by, the pile of books that replaced a broken leg on the sofa on which her brother was lying. And then the false languid air of the man himself—his unshaven face, his shiny cheekbones, an over-ripe pimple protruding from the back of his neck, the threads of white that were already discernible about his temples! And her disgust grew with each of such perceptions. In a second flash she recoiled with an uncontrollable and snobbish fear that she might be reduced to taking into her house and introducing to her friends a brother whose main vulgarity, had she thought of it, would have been seen to rest mainly on the fact that he had been an invalid and was therefore poor. And she was suddenly left with a single violent desire: never to see him again, to be rid of him, to get him back, at any cost, to his sanatorium.

Under the impact of that realization, without thinking to affect those sentiments of sisterly love that she was so far from feeling, in fact without being quite aware of what she was doing, Maria Luisa approached the sofa, bent over, and offered a hard stiff cheek to the invalid's kiss. Then, looking down at him without taking a seat at his side, and in a tone that betrayed her impatience and embarrassment, she began:

"I have come, Stefano, to——"

But either to soften his sister's hostility, or perhaps because he had not noticed it, Stefano did not allow her to finish.

"Oh, what wonderful perfume!" he exclaimed in a loud voice, taking the hem of her cape in his hands and smelling at it with a hungry blissful enjoyment. "What perfume! Let me smell it again!"

Annoyed, Maria Luisa bent over and waited for her brother to satisfy himself.

"It's just an ordinary perfume," she said, straightening up. "I was going to say, Stefano——"

But again he interrupted, hitching back on the sofa but not releasing his clutch on her cape:

"And your gown! Let me look at your gown! My, how stylish! How beautiful, your gown! And that bow at the left of your waist there! You know, they tell me that's the style this year!"

"He was for ever raving over my gown, five years ago," thought Maria Luisa, her disgust overpowering her. "But then he was sincere. Now he is putting it on."

Drawing her cape about her, she said:

"It's just an ordinary gown. Now don't bother to pay me any more compliments, Stefano——"

But the invalid seemed not to hear. He kept looking at her and nodding, lifting his fat face into the circle of light that was made by the upturned lamp.

"You know what I say, Maria Luisa? It may be the light in this room, it may be my joy at seeing you again. Anyhow, I have an impression that all your troubles have not told on you a bit. They have done you good. You seem prettier, younger, with a sort of sad wistful air that becomes you wonderfully. Fine! Fine! I couldn't be better satisfied. But why don't you sit down? And why don't you introduce your friend?"

Irritated, with a helpless feeling, Maria Luisa had to resign herself to introducing Pietro. When he learned that the young man was engaged to Sofia, Stefano smiled an unctuous complimentary smile.

"Oh, then we are almost relatives! Do have a chair! I am delighted to know you! Do have a chair!"

Pietro went and got a chair, the invalid following him with a gay, unctuously benevolent expression.

Observing that he was at last seated, Stefano turned again towards his sister.

"My poor Maria Luisa, we can come to the more important matters by and by. Let me explain meanwhile why I did not go directly to your place, preferring this ugly furnished room to your villa. Ever since you came in you have done nothing but stare at things, as though you were half frightened and did not know what on earth you had fallen into. So you see—I ought to explain."

But at that point he saw Pietro fumbling about in his pockets. He broke off, reached for a package of cigarettes on the sofa and handed them to him, entreating:

"Do take one of these. They are smuggled in from the Vatican—the genuine article!"

He turned to his sister again.

"As I was saying, it was not ill-feeling on my part that kept me from going to your place. It was your fault. You sent me that telegram, telling me not to move. When I got it, I moved just the same, because it was too late to change my plans. But then, thinking that something might have happened—I don't know, that maybe you weren't at home, that the house wasn't ready—instead of going to you, I came here. Perhaps you wonder why I didn't go to a hotel. Well, I answer: expense and convenience. I haven't any too much money, as you know. As for the comfort, in a hotel it would have been hard for me to get the little attentions I need, whereas here I am almost as well off as at the sanatorium. In the first place these people know me. I lived with them, you see, seven years ago, in the blessed era when I was a student at the university. And then talk about coincidences! While I was spending seven years making myself over into an invalid, the girl in the house here was studying to be a nurse. That was why my inquiry led to her offer. I am sick—she takes care of me!"

He laughed at his balanced phrase with a sort of half-bitter satisfaction that struck Pietro as the one flash of sincerity in his whole talk.

"Jesting aside, Maria Luisa," he began after a pause, "I am now ready to go to your place—but on one condition: that you allow me to take the boy in the house here along. Carlino, I mean. He has grown fond of me, and at least until I am able to walk without those pegs there, he will be a great help. Poor chap!" he added. "He must feel pretty miserable here! When I told him I was going to take him along, he hopped around for joy! Anyhow, as I was saying, it has to be on condition that Carlino comes too. Now you see, I haven't even unpacked my trunks. If you have your car here we can do the moving at once."

He paused and began to feel about behind him on the sofa for the tassel of the bell, the rope of which had been carried shiftlessly across the ceiling from the hole through which it entered on the other side of the room.

"Shall I tell them to get things ready?" he asked, turning towards his sister again.

Maria Luisa had been listening to his talk with growing irritation. At that question she could no longer hide her feelings and leapt to her feet.

"Of course not, Stefano!" she cried imperiously, frightened. "Don't call anybody! What are you dreaming of?"

"Oh, I see!" said the invalid, calmly. He must have made up his mind to pretend not to have understood. "Perhaps you prefer to wait till tomorrow."

"No! No!" answered Maria Luisa, in a hurried nervous tone, gazing around the room and particularly at the door, as though she were thinking of the problem of getting away. "You do not understand. And yet, I telegraphed you not to move. You have been imagining who knows what, and making who knows what plans. The truth is, I cannot have you with me in my house."

Stefano was unable to continue his pretence after that.

"Oh, I see! So that's it!" he said slowly, with a wan smile. "So that's the way it is! At least, you're frank!"

Maria Luisa seemed not to hear.

"When I wrote you that first time," she exclaimed, "I really thought I was going to leave Matteo. That was why I asked you to come and stay with me. But then things improved and we patched up our differences. That made your help no longer necessary. That was why I said it was better for you not to move." She paused, frowning, avoiding her brother's eyes. "And your health, Stefano?" she asked with an annoyed, hasty anxiety. "How are you doing? Somewhat better, at least?"

His sister's declaration seemed to have plunged Stefano into a deep pensive melancholy. At her question he started, looked at her, then, with malice aforethought, sheltering his eyes from the light with a hand, he peered at her as though he could hardly believe what he had heard.

"What is the matter, Maria Luisa?" he asked ironically. "Feeling bad?"

"Bad?" she asked. "Why should I be feeling bad?"

"Why—this interest you show in my condition!" And the invalid laughed a forced laugh. Then, addressing Pietro, who sat looking at him from the foot of the sofa, he explained: "You understand, my sister and I have not seen each other for five years —five years if you please! During that time she has never once inquired to find out whether I was alive or dead."

Again he laughed. The palish light from the upturned lamp cast two yellow reflections on his cheekbones, but his eyes remained fixed and unexpressive, and unpleasantly accentuated the forced ironical quality of his mirth. Then, with the same suggestion of insincerity, suddenly shifting from his mock hilarity to a mock tenderness, he leaned forward from the sofa and seized one of his sister's hands.

"There, there, Maria Luisa!" he said, coaxingly. "Don't mind what I said. You have to make allowances in dealing with good-for-nothings like us sick folk. Don't imagine I hold it against you because you don't want me at your house. I know how fond you have always been of me, and I know that, as far as you could, you would always be ready to help me. You ask me how I am. Not very well, my poor Maria Luisa! I am miserable." He sighed, pale, deeply stirred, and let himself down on the sofa again. "I am so wretched that the doctors have ceased trying to deceive me. They don't bother to recommend treatments any more. They allow me to guess that, since they are quite helpless, the best thing

I can do is to find some way to pass the time I have left on earth as comfortably as possible. No, I am not well, Maria Luisa!"

A brief silence ensued. Maria Luisa was clearly aware that some little word of sisterly love, even though it might not do her brother any good, would at least have the advantage of freeing her, finally, of her profitless panic. But, as all along, like a great landslide blocking the flow of a rushing brook, the mass of her raging fears prevented her, let alone from expressing, even from feeling the slightest sentiment, and emptied her mind and bound her limbs, leaving her sitting there hostile, mute. She kept looking at her brother and, despite the counter-striving of her intelligence, she could feel only repugnance for his fat face, and loathing for the damp hand that was pressing hers.

"You are not well?" she managed to stammer. "What is the matter?"

"Just two little points of infection!" he answered, smiling despairingly, pale. "Two tiny volcanoes, but virulent, in constant activity! Now of late, to tell the truth, they have been quiet, but we can look for a new eruption from one day to the next. The bad place seems to be high up, in the spinal column. Sooner or later it will turn into meningitis, and then, as the phrase goes, I shall have ceased to suffer."

In her sheer disgust Maria Luisa this time could find no strength for an answer. But with Pietro it was different. Though he was conscious of a sort of insincere pose in the invalid, he still could not avoid a feeling of intense distress and pity at the evident signs of illness in the man, and of neglect and abandonment in his miserable quarters. Whatever Stefano's real character, he thought, half in anger, half in sympathy, whatever his real intentions, he was certainly a sick man, and no consideration of social pride, no personal dislike however well motivated, could justify the almost inhuman coldness and hostility of his sister towards him.

"Don't talk that way," he interposed, suddenly. "You will certainly get well. You could not look better, and had your sister not told me, I should never have dreamed that you were ill. You will get well—you'll see! Give time time, we say."

He had spoken feelingly, with conviction. Maria Luisa could not help turning and gazing at him in wonder. The invalid for his part did not seem surprised at all. Shaking his head with a knowing earnestness he answered:

"Time was when I thought that myself. Then I had to get used to realizing that it would be as impossible for me to recover as it would be to roll back the years and be born again. No, I shall never get well—that is the only thing I know for certain. That is the reason why I left the sanatorium and came here. At least, I thought, I can pass my few remaining years as pleasantly as possible, enjoying some of the good things of life. And I also thought," he added bitterly, with a glance at his sister, "that in her situation, with all her money, all her friends, Maria Luisa might be the person most likely to provide me with the things I might need. Now I am forced to admit that I have been mistaken."

In Stefano's words there was still—and Pietro could not help feeling it—a something that did not seem quite genuine. But his disgust at just that moment bore less on the invalid's deceitfulness than on the sister's harsh and quite stupid attitude towards him.

"But, no," he answered, "you must not take your sister's bad humour too seriously. She seems that way today because . . . well, she has had her worries too, today. But you will see, or at least I think you will, if you are patient, that you will get from her everything you need. Am I not right, Maria Luisa?" he added, half hoping to melt her stubborn iciness. "During these next days we are going to do all we can to help Stefano, are we not?"

He saw the woman sweep him with a glance of contempt, but no answer came. Instead she addressed her brother in a hasty, urgent tone, half dazed:

"In my judgment, Stefano, you would do best by looking after yourself, and that means by going back to the hospital. And I also believe," she added hesitating, not knowing what else to say, "that if you try to, you will surely get well."

"Who cares about getting well?" the invalid replied, exasperated. "Suppose that doesn't figure in my plans? Would you force me to all the same?" He laughed as he looked questioningly at Pietro. "I come to you and I say: I am too sick by this time ever to expect a cure. I am tired of doctors, medicines, treatments, hospitals. All I want now is to have a good time. And you"—at that point he smiled sensuously, while a roguish expression overspread his face—"what do you do? Instead of—what shall I say? —instead of taking me into your house and introducing me to some pretty girl among your friends, you answer: 'Take care of yourself. Go back to the hospital.' A fine answer that, I must say!"

He paused and raised his eyes towards his sister as though to note the effect of his words. Maria Luisa's face had a drawn expression, as though she were about to burst into tears.

"But I have no room in my house," she began, perplexed, terrified, "and then again I have no friends."

"Oh, come now!" interrupted the invalid, hotly. "All you would have to do would be to show me that group of pretty girls I saw standing around you in a picture they published in the papers about your dance a month ago. That, I repeat, would fix me up for good and all." He paused and then went back to his pathetic manner: "No, the truth is you are ashamed of me. I am just an old shoe that they all want to be rid of. Yes, my dear Monatti," he added, turning to Pietro with a sad and unexpected cordiality, "I am just a piece of refuse. All they want is to stick me away into some sanatorium or other in the mountains, and let me slowly die there. There you have the truth!"

His sincerity in all that was apparent enough, but he still kept an eye on his sister, as though trying to see whether he might not, perchance, have succeeded in stirring her. What he saw was a deepening of the wretchedness and loathing that were written on her face, while her jaws set in bitter resolve. She looked at her wrist watch, then turned to Pietro and said:

"It's getting late. It's time we were going."

That could have left the invalid no doubt that her mind was made up.

A silence followed. The sick man lowered his eyes. His face bore a hopeless expression, as though he stood aghast at the magnitude of his misfortune and did not know what to say or do. Maria Luisa was hurriedly pulling on her gloves. As she approached the sofa to bid her brother good-bye, he started, and like a hawker who has been lowering and lowering his price till at last he stands resolved to sell at any price, even at a loss, he turned towards her, his face bright with a last hope.

"Wait!" he said. "You can't take me in, and you can't introduce me to anybody. Well, at least can't you ask me to your house some day, so that I can meet your husband and your sister-in-law? I could hardly ask anything less." And he added with a sheepish smile: "I think I have a sort of right to that much."

But there was no stopping Maria Luisa on the incline of her selfish panic. Her revulsion now was physical rather than reasoned. Had her brother asked her for a glass of water, she would have suspected some hidden design in the manœuvre and refused it.

"No, Stefano, I can't," she answered. "Believe me, it's impossible. So then—get better, eh? And good-bye till I see you again!"

He did not take the hand that she offered him. Instead he lowered his head as though what he had just heard were not a refusal but a proposal that required discussion and for which his answer was awaited. His actual intent was to detain his sister as long as possible, and he was vainly seeking a pretext that would enable him to do so. It was at that point that two knocks were heard at the door.

VII

"COME in!" called the sick man, without raising his head.

The door opened and two persons entered, a woman and a boy. The boy seemed to be seventeen or eighteen years old. He was tall and thin, and, to judge by his drawn-in shoulders, rather frail of health. His face was not so much pale as white, and under his tumbled hair two black eyes gleamed in it with a sort of astonished look. Most noticeable in his schoolboy face, aside from a curious readiness of response to encouragement, as in a young dog, was an air that suggested extraordinary, almost absent-minded ingenuousness. The woman seemed to be about thirty. Big, with a strong bust and an abnormally full bosom, she tapered off from waist to feet, so that her ankles seemed incredibly slender. Above her shoulders, which appeared to be doubled in size by the volume of her breast, strutted with a sort of pride a little head that might have belonged to a half-feathered bird, with a pointed beak, short hair, and a pair of round good-natured eyes.

They came in side by side, half quarrelling, the woman dragging the boy by an arm, and the boy carrying a valise in his hand. They advanced and halted in the centre of the room.

"Excuse me, Signor Davico," the woman began angrily. "You can leave this minute, so far as you are concerned. But that doesn't mean that Carlino has to go with you. What on earth has he got to do with it? He isn't your valet, is he?"

Maria Luisa and Pietro had turned as the door opened. The invalid still lay with lowered eyes, his face showing the full depth of his despondency. But the aggressive pronouncement of the young woman forced him from his meditation. Slowly he raised the heavy eyelids over his steady lifeless eyes and looked at the two new arrivals blankly, as though he were seeing them for the first time and did not know what to make of them.

"You are wrong, Valentina," he finally answered. "I have not been influencing Carlino. He offered to follow me of his own accord. Anyhow," he added, with an ill-tempered malice that reflected the effect that his sister's conduct had had on him, "is it my fault, my dear Valentina, if your brother is so happy at home that all he can think of is getting away?"

"That is no business of yours," snapped the young woman belligerently. "Whether he is happy or unhappy, it's nothing for you to worry about."

"Just so!" returned Stefano, smiling, and it was clear by that that he was pretending to enjoy the quarrel in order to show his sister how lightly he took her rebuff. "I said as much myself, dear Valentina! I did not ask your brother to do anything. He volunteered to go with me."

"Oh, as for that, don't talk to me! I know you!" said the young woman, and she seemed to be really angry.

The boy meanwhile had recovered from his bashfulness and was taking the offensive, trying to free himself from his sister's clutch.

"Let me alone," he cried. "I said I was going, and I am. What have you got to say about it?"

"Good, what have I got to say about it!" cried the woman with a good-natured voice that was forced to be sharp. "A silly question! As though I weren't your sister! Now listen to me, Carlino," she continued, laying a white, smooth, rather beautiful hand on her broad bosom and looking into his eyes sorrowfully. "I have told you time and again: Ever since Signor Davico came here you have not been the same. You have not given enough time to your lessons, and now, as though that were not bad enough, without a word to anybody you pack up and say you are going to leave home. All that, just to be with Signor Davico, who cares not a snap for you and is just using you to wait on him! Your school work, Carlino! How about school?"

Perplexed, between a fear that his escape from home might be compromised and a feeling of shame that such a family scene should occur in the presence of strangers, the boy squirmed with rage and impatience.

"But I have told you that going to live with Signor Davico will not keep me from working. I shall go to school every day. What more do you want?"

The woman shook her head despairingly.

"No, Carlino, listen to me! Don't go! Signor Davico cannot see things the way a sister can. You are too young, Carlino. You don't know enough about the world to leave home."

Really attentive to his sister's words, the boy none the less kept looking nervously, mechanically, from Maria Luisa to Stefano, and from Stefano to Pietro, as though trying to measure on their faces the effects the debate was having.

"What difference does my age make?" he argued querulously.

Valentina did not seem to hear.

"Besides, what will you be doing there all alone? Signor Davico will be busy with his affairs. He can't be wasting time on you all day long."

The boy turned his worried eyes away from the strangers, and replied in a tone of mingled impatience, rage, and a sort of boyish superiority:

"Haven't I told you what I would do? Why do I have to repeat it all? Mornings I'll go to school. Afternoons I'll do my homework. Then I'll go out with Signor Davico, and again after supper, if he wants to. Then I'll go to bed. Oh, don't be afraid! I'll manage my day all right! I don't need anybody's help."

The sister stood and looked at him with steady eyes that evinced a fascinated distress.

"And your father?" she finally asked, as though grasping in despair at a last and feeblest argument. "Have you explained this fine programme to your father?"

The excited delivery, the ready-made plan, the innocent tone, and the haughty condescension of the boy, suddenly caught Maria

Luisa's interest. Engrossed in her thought of getting away, she had been busy with her gloves when the first exchanges in the argument took place, and had paid but scant attention. But now, whether out of a cruel interest in seeing how Carlino would take the disappointment that could not fail to strike him full between the shoulders, or whether, having nothing more to fear from Stefano, she was not disinclined to witness a dispute that under other circumstances might have concerned her directly, she was suddenly struck by the boy's appearance, observed that this sudden curiosity somehow dispelled her besetting sense of panic, and halted near the doorway. There, furthermore, she was conscious of a vague and quite unexplainable desire to attract attention upon herself in order to have a pretext for remaining. She broadened her smile, drawing herself up to her full height in the doorway, with her fur coat open in front, one glove on and the other in her hand, staring with eyes that simply could not free themselves of their stupid harshness upon the two belligerents who were contending in the centre of the room.

Valentina noticed her smile.

"What do you seem to find so amusing?" she asked, advancing aggressively upon Maria Luisa. "I don't see anything amusing in it at all. Your brother can very well find somebody else to wait on him—it makes little difference to him. As for Carlino, if he leaves home, he won't study, he may fall in with bad company, and then, when your brother has used him for all he is worth, he will come home, and we here, and not you, who find it so amusing there, will have to stand the consequences of this crazy act of his."

Maria Luisa had recovered enough of her poise to be able to smile, but not enough to forget social differences in the face of the girl's attack and so disarm her with a gracious courtesy. She reared angrily under the assault and surveyed the girl Valentina from head to foot.

"My poor woman—" she began, with a tone that set out to be blasting and was fatuously condescending. But the girl did not allow her to finish.

"When one has an automobile and rings on one's fingers" (Maria Luisa did not happen to be wearing a ring) "and when one has nothing to do all day long, it is easy to laugh at poor folks who have to work for a living! But Carlino here," she added proudly, "was not born rich, and now he has to think of going to school, just as later on he will have to think of finding serious work and not just playing errand boy to your brother here."

Carlino had been hurrying anxious glances between his sister and Maria Luisa. He squirmed desperately.

"But I just told you . . ."

Valentina broke him off as she had Maria Luisa:

"You—be quiet!"

Then she turned on Maria Luisa again.

"Besides, supposing I give you a piece of advice. If I were you, instead of laughing at people and coming to start trouble in other people's houses, I would be having an eye to my own business. I say no more, but as the proverb goes, a word to the wise . . . !"

This time, in Maria Luisa, more potent far than pride was stupor.

"My own business?" she echoed, frowning. "What does a person like you know about my business?"

"Plenty!" countered Valentina, though it seemed that she somewhat repented of having carried her offensive to that reckless extent. "Oh, I know plenty—but I don't tell all I know."

"You don't?" said the other, theatrically, taking a step forward. "You have made an insinuation. Explain yourself!"

Hesitant but not afraid, Valentina seemed to waver between a counsel of prudence and the keen enjoyment of delivering a mortal thrust. She made her option:

"You are the Marchesa Tanzillo, I hear."

"Yes, I happen to be."

"And your husband's name is Matteo Tanzillo?"

"Right again! Though," she added petulantly, "I don't see why I allow myself to be cross-examined by you."

Valentina did not feel the slap. Slowly, somewhat unwillingly, she pronounced:

"Well, if you insist on knowing, your husband and my sister Andreina know each other. That is something for you to think about, instead of coming here to snicker at people and make trouble. What's the meaning of that glare?" she added, after a pause, in a defiant rage that had its quantum of remorse and failing self-confidence. "Perhaps I didn't speak clearly enough! Yet it couldn't be clearer. Your husband and my sister are like that!" And she made a vulgar but expressive gesture of the Roman people, bringing the forefinger of her right hand into contact with the forefinger of her left. "In plain language, they are lovers. Now snicker some more, if you've got it in you!"

She drew back a step and glared defiantly at Maria Luisa, in a demeanour that seemed to say: "Now let's see her faint!"

But great was her disappointment at seeing the visitor look at her for a moment, then bite her lips, lower her head with a wretched, utterly bored expression, and finally begin working at the other glove.

In truth, the girl's allusion to Matteo's infidelities had not exactly surprised or offended Maria Luisa. It had intensified her disgust rather, giving her a more complete and definite sense of the precariousness of her whole situation in life.

"Signorina," she said, coldly, politely, "do not worry. You shall not see me here again. As for the matter of Carlino . . ." At the mention of his name the boy was startled and looked at her, but Maria Luisa was buttoning her glove with a hard frown on her face and her head lowered. "As for the matter of Carlino, there is no risk whatever of his going to my house to live. I have no intention of having my brother as a guest there. If my brother is intending to move from here and take Carlino with him, that is something for you people to settle." And she opened her handbag and began to colour her lips.

A quiet satisfaction overspread Valentina's face, but she had been awed by the haughty politeness of the visitor and seemed anxious to be forgotten along with her triumph. She shrank discreetly against the wall beyond the door.

Carlino for his part turned deathly pale. He gazed silently at his sister, then at Maria Luisa. Finally his eyes came to rest on the sick man.

"So then, it is true, Signor Stefano?" he asked in his thread of a voice. "You are not going away?"

Stefano answered in a pitiably discouraged tone:

"I am afraid it's true, Carlino—I'm afraid so, alas! My sister has changed her mind and is slamming the door in my face. But never mind, Carlino! We can do without her, can't we—just as we can do without the rest of them? We shall have our fun just the same."

These reassurances did not seem to help. Without a word, in an automatic, absent-minded manner, the boy set his valise on the floor in the middle of the room, and went and stood behind the chair to which the lamp was tied. There he rested his hands on the chairback and looked into space ahead of him. In that position his white frightened face came within the dark shadow formed by the shade of the upturned lamp. No one could see that his eyes had filled with tears.

A long silence followed, all of them holding their peace and all for different reasons; but of the five the one whose head sheltered the wildest, strangest thoughts behind that veil of silence was undoubtedly the Marchesa Tanzillo.

After a first wave of astonishment Valentina's allusions had begun to make her think. "If she talks like that of Matteo's relations with her sister, it can only be that their relations have not ceased, that Sofia came and lied to me, that they are manœuvring again to deceive me." And with that thought came another wave of cold but furious resentment against her husband, and in its wake, as usual, the besetting resolve to square accounts with him and forget him by finding a lover for herself.

Her eyes chanced to fall on Carlino. As he stood there in the darker area behind the lampshade, the shadow and his tense emotion lent a singular attractiveness to his face. To observe that, in the again rising flood of her panic, and to associate the boy with her grim resolve, was the matter of a flash. Why should not Carlino be the very person she needed? Her heart began to beat furiously and her breath came in short violent pantings. She stood there with her eyes upon the boyish figure that rose, stiff and spectral as a ghost, against the circle of bright light on the wall. Precipitate plans for a seduction began to flock into her mind amid a whirl of frightened and ineffectual doubts. "What can I be dreaming of? Am I mad? With a mere boy? That woman's brother?" She found herself moving imperceptibly closer to the boy and framing in her mind the remarks that would best convey her idea to him.

But a noisy opening of the door distracted her attention from this turmoil of projects. She started, trembling almost in terror, like a thief who is waiting behind a thicket for the best moment to rob a henroost, who feels a touch on a shoulder, turns in deadly panic, sees no one, and finally understands that he has been brushed by a twig moving in the wind.

VIII

"Anybody home?" called a hoarse half-bleating voice.

"Come in, come in, professor!" cried the sick man without looking up, indifferently.

The bearded, hesitant figure of Carlino's father stood in the doorway.

"I was going along the hall," he explained, smoothing his moustache and beard with his hand, and fixing his deep shining eyes upon Maria Luisa, "when I heard my son's voice, and I have ventured to come in. . . . So then," he added, coming forward, "how is the patient?"

"Very well, thank you," answered Stefano, in a routine tone, still without looking up.

The silence and the constraint of the company in the room seemed to arouse the professor's suspicions. He stopped and surveyed the scene with his piercing eyes. They finally rested on the valise that Carlino had set on the floor in the middle of the room.

"What's that? A valise?" He bent over and read the name plate through his glasses. "My valise! What is it doing just here?"

Valentina still stood leaning against the wall beyond the door, with her hands thrust into the shallow pockets of her apron. There was an expression of unboastful triumph on her face. She gave a good-natured snicker.

"Carlino has decided to go travelling."

"Travelling? What do you mean?"

"Well, he was intending to go away with Signor Davico."

"Signor Davico? How's that?" And the alarmed professor adjusted his spectacles to his nose and looked at the sick man. "Signor Davico is leaving us?"

"He was thinking of it."

The satisfied, good-natured, ironical tone in which the sister spoke of matters so close to his heart must have seemed more insulting to Carlino than he could bear. He suddenly emerged from his desperate day-dream, and without looking at anyone, lowering his white face against the bright circle of light, he said:

"I have an impression that I am not needed here."

And he strode to the centre of the room, picked up the valise, turned on his heel, and went out.

The professor looked at the door through which his son had vanished, then at the invalid. His bearded face expressed wonder and a growing suspicion. Finally he stepped up to Stefano's sofa.

"I don't understand. You were thinking of going away?"

"Yes," Stefano replied. Then apparently resigned to issuing from his thoughtful, despondent muteness, he drew himself more nearly to a sitting posture and arranged the pillows behind him. "She was right. I had been thinking of going away. However, that is all over now. I am staying."

The professor looked mistrustfully about. Then he took a chair, planted himself in it, heels together, knees apart, and rested his head on the chairback. He thought a moment, then, straightening up, looking steadily at Stefano, and pointing a questioning finger straight at him, he asked:

"The truth now! Has Carlino been impolite to you?"

"No," replied Stefano, with a face that tried to seem amused at the question. "Of course not! Why should Carlino be impolite to me?"

"Well, then it was Valentina?"

"The idea!" exclaimed the sick man, seeming, as in his repartee with the girl, to be enjoying these exchanges as a way of displaying his own superior sereneness before his sister. "Valentina and I couldn't be getting along better, could we, Valentina?"

The girl turned spitefully towards the sofa.

"You say so!" she answered significantly, so stressing the words as to leave their meaning doubtful.

The professor again rested his head on the chairback and sat stroking his beard. It never once occurred to him that Stefano might have decided to leave of his own accord. He could only suppose that some mysterious conspiracy, organized to his damage, lay at the bottom of it.

"I wonder!" he insisted, lowering his voice cautiously. "May it not have occurred to you to go away because somebody came and said something to you in my regard? Something, for instance, regarding my career as a teacher, and in particular the latter part of that career? I mention the matter, Signor Davico, because—you may not know it—there is a small but exceedingly poisonous and persistent group of persons who are always working in the dark to effect my ruin in one way or another. Now no one came to you and said to you with a sort of sarcastic snicker: 'Hee, hee! Professor Malacrida says he resigned from the school system because of the unfairness of his superiors—actually he was dismissed as a neurotic, a lunatic, and worse'?"

Easily, naturally, as though she were doing something she was in the habit of doing, Valentina stepped forward from her post at the wall and laid her hands on her father's shoulders.

"Come, papa," she said gently, firmly. "Don't you think we ought to be going? These people want to talk."

And meanwhile, behind her father's back, she put a finger to her forehead with the calm smile of a knowing nurse, rolling her eyes up towards the ceiling and shaking her head as though to say: "Don't mind him, he is not right here!"

But the father did not think any such thing. The presence of two strangers in the house interested him mightily. His one idea was to see the thing through, and nothing could have been more distasteful to him than the proposal his daughter had made. But she, probably, would have had her way had not Maria Luisa, for reasons of her own, decided to interfere. Carlino's sudden departure had again thrown all her schemes awry. She saw, with apprehension, that if Valentina managed to get the father away too, she would be left with no pretext for a future visit to the boy, and lose any opportunity for a talk with him alone. She decided to do everything possible to detain them. "If I can keep them in here," she thought, in a frantic calculation, "there may be a chance to drop a word to him in his room." She rushed into the brilliant gracious manner that she affected in society, and began volubly:

"No, no, please don't desert us. We have had our talk. What you say is most interesting, professor. Now the little group of people who, you say, hate you so much . . ." She hastily took a chair, placed it near the sofa, and seated herself in it, facing the door. "I was wondering whether you may not have felt that you yourself had harmed them in some way. How about that?"

By that time she had opened her handbag, taken out her cigarette case, and snapped it open in the professor's face.

"Turkish!" said Malacrida, bending over and taking one. "Really, I smoke nothing but stogies, but I will try one of these in your honour."

He lighted the cigarette, blowing a ring with the smoke, and looking at the gold tip interestedly.

"Did I ever do any harm to them?" he repeated slowly, bitterly. "I should say I did! I was fair! I told the truth! I stood for justice! That was doing them harm enough! It cost me my position, and it almost cost me my life."

"Your life!" echoed Maria Luisa, who was in her own tumult of thoughts and had hardly been listening. "Why your life?"

"Well, almost that!" the professor attenuated, trying to be exact and truly modest. "Oh, it's a long story. I doubt whether you would have the time or the patience to listen to it all."

"Both of them we have, professor," Maria Luisa insisted, irritated, impatient. "Let us have the story, please! Time? Patience? We have all the time and patience you need."

The professor sketched a flattered smile.

"Kind of you," he answered, "most kind! Well, you see—but I have not had the pleasure of an introduction to this gentleman here."

And he bowed to Pietro.

"What?" cried Maria Luisa, with a wry smirk. "You don't know him!?" And the accent she put on the "him" voiced her full contempt. "I must attend to that: Pietro Monatti—Professor Malacrida! Now the story!"

But Pietro's family name had awakened an echo deep down in the professor's memory.

"Monatti! . . ." he said, groping. "Monatti—Alfredo Monatti! Your father's name was Alfredo? He was a clerk at the Ministry of Public Works? Quite so! And your mother's name was Rosa . . . ? Why, it all comes back. . . . How it all comes back! . . ."

All the while Pietro had been not a little annoyed at the incomprehensible manœuvres of his companion and, eager to get away, he had kept to one side in hopes of abbreviating the professor's story. But the mention of his parents' names brought the red to his face. He had never had occasion to be ashamed of the humble station of his father and mother. They had died while he was a child and long before his ascent of the social ladder had begun. Having relegated his parents to a prehistoric past he had never dreamed that they could ever come to life again to be an embarrassment to him. Great was his discomfiture, therefore, when he felt the blood mounting to his cheeks, and a stupid and nonsensical mortification tying his tongue. "It is just as Maria Luisa said," he groaned inwardly. "I must be a snob after all."

But that was just a humiliating flash. He was able in an instant to affect an air of interest.

"Oh, so you knew my parents!"

The professor nodded calmly.

"Your father was one of my best friends, if not the best. And you I saw when you were no taller than that." With his hand he gave an indication of Pietro's stature as a child. "Valentina," he called, turning to his daughter, "don't you remember the Monattis, when they were living in the Via Ofanto?"

Not knowing where to put his eyes by that time, Pietro let them rest on the girl.

"Remember them? Of course I do! So you—you would be Pierino?"

"Yes, that's Pierino!" the professor assented, troubled, thoughtful, considering Pietro over the tops of his glasses. "Who would have foreseen that, after trotting him on my knee as a baby, I was one day to find him a grown man here!"

Overtaken by the flood of his memories, the professor took off his glasses, dimmed them with his breath, and then began to wipe them with a large coloured handkerchief.

"Who could have foreseen that! Those were the days, those were! There had been no war yet—living was easy. The children were still little and caused no worries. My wife was still with us. . . . Well, perhaps we had better think no more of them. Instead"—putting on his glasses again, he turned with fatuous deference towards Maria Luisa—"instead, I believe the marchesa wanted to hear the story of my withdrawal from the teaching profession."

Maria Luisa had been sitting there, biting her lips and raising and lowering her eyebrows, with her dull and troubled eyes fixed on the door. She came to herself with a start, as from far away.

"Oh, yes," she gasped, hastily, "the story—by all means, the story!"

The professor addressed himself to his task like an orator working into his pose on the rostrum. He smoothed his beard, twirled his moustache, straightened his coat in front, and ended with a satisfied glance about the room.

"The story, in brief, is as follows. It was the year the war ended. To my misfortune, you must know, I was sent to teach in a little town which, in order not to name it, I will call Z. Well, on arriving at Z., I went straight to call on Commendator Silenzi, principal of the Virgil High and Grammar School, in order to gather hints as to the neighbourhood, the town, and anything relating to my work. 'A fine place!' he says to me. 'In fact, couldn't be better. Only—there's one thing—there's a boy named Fiore. Now Fiore—whatever he does, whatever his marks—Fiore has to pass!' 'How is that?' say I. 'Please explain!' 'You don't know, but you will find out!' the principal answered. 'Z. is run by a gang of rascals and the leader of the gang, in truth a most redoubtable fellow, is a man named Fiore, father of the student in question.' At that I look him straight in the eye, I do, just for a moment. Then without saying a word I turn and go.

"School opened the next day, and the moment I appeared in my classroom I made an announcement. I said: 'You must understand one thing. There are to be no favourites here. All students are on a par. Merit alone is to distinguish them. One law for all, and all equal before it!' Silence on all sides! Comes November, comes December. But at Christmas, lo and behold, I find at my house a demijohn of white wine and four fat capons. 'Ho, ho,' say I. 'So that's it! The gentleman thinks he has to deal with one of those easy-going teachers who will do anything in order to live in peace!' So I tell my wife to send those presents back and, vacation over, I am sterner than ever with the boy, Fiore, who, I may add parenthetically, was a perfect idiot. Well, that term passed, and the next, and there we were at the end of the year. I went to the principal's to hand in my marks. All the other teachers were there. When my turn comes, I get up and in a calm clear voice begin to read off my names, beginning with the letter A. When I come to the letter F, I slow up, I do: 'Fallacara, promoted; Falqui, promoted; Fiastri, promoted; Fiore, Amedeo'—at that name I stop and I look around the room to be sure that everybody is listening; then I say: 'Amedeo Fiore, failed in all subjects, to be re-examined in October! . . .' What happened then I can hardly describe. Turning pale, and limp as rags, the teachers all crowd around and say that I am crazy. The principal comes to me and begs me with joined hands to alter my marks, telling me that I am committing suicide. . . . But I was deaf in both ears, I was. . . . They couldn't budge me! Well, the marks were posted that afternoon in the hallway at the school. It was well after dark when I started for home unarmed, alone—for nobody dared to go with me, at that late hour. I had to walk through the whole town to get to my house. 'Now,' I thought, 'if they intend to kill me, they are free, quite free, to do so. I have done my duty. My conscience is at rest.' "

"Why didn't they kill you?" asked Maria Luisa, who was looking for a favourable moment to leave the room, had so far not found one, and therefore wanted to prolong the story.

"They had decided to do something worse," the professor continued. "Instead of striking at the body, they struck at the soul. They took my place away. There I was supporting a wife and a family of children. They took my place away! What finer vengeance than that? How they managed it I never knew. One thing is certain: a week later the Ministry of Education put me on the retired list."

At that point Valentina interrupted, good-natured, calm:

"But, papa, why don't you tell things the way they happened? Why don't you admit just for once that you had to retire because of your health? . . . It's his vanity," she added, turning to the others. "That's why he is always seeing mystery where there is none. If he were not so conceited, he would not talk the way he does."

The professor seemed to be pleased rather than offended at that interpretation, since it was based on personal peculiarities of his own. He wagged an emphatic finger at his daughter and returned:

"Health, yes! But that, Valentina, and don't you forget it, was the official pretext! For that matter, I wasn't the only one to be suspicious. All the teachers at Z. agreed with me in attributing my retirement to the influence of the gang."

In the course of the professor's narrative, Stefano seemed to have entirely recovered from his discomfiture.

"Perhaps, professor," he remarked ironically, "the minister in Rome may have been a member of the gang."

"I have never doubted it, never doubted it," nodded the professor. He had not perceived the invalid's sarcastic blink. "I consider it more than probable. You see, Signor Davico, I am never surprised at anything. The world has always been against me. . . ."

Maria Luisa thought that it was not time yet for her to leave the room in quest of Carlino. Her heart was beating violently. She looked at the professor, trying to master her nervousness, wanting to say something but unable to imagine what.

"But why," she murmured finally, "why is the world against you?"

The professor assumed a fatuous, didactic manner:

"I wonder, marchesa, if you ever read a double couplet that I wrote for the first page of a volume of verse I once published—*Scripta manent?"*

"I don't believe I ever did."

"Well, it ran as follows." And the professor rolled up his eyes as he began to declaim:

The day was dark and stormy when I came on the scene;
There was more rain and thunder than ever there had been;
A veil of blood obscured the sky beneath which I was born,
And groans and wails and cries of wrath foretold a soul forlorn.

"When I read those lines to my father," the professor confided, "his eyes filled with tears and he said that on no condition should I ever think of publishing them. Imagine that! My own father! But I went ahead, I did. I do believe his death was partly due to spite because of it. Yes indeed, the thing began in my own home."

"But later on," suggested Maria Luisa with an involuntary sigh, her eyes on the door, "later on things went better, didn't they?"

"Better!" The professor gave a little snicker of deprecating scorn that imparted a strange vibration to the tip of his beard. "Better! You, marchesa, are talking with one of the most persecuted men that ever lived on this earth."

"Imagine that!" commented Maria Luisa, leaning back in her chair, her eyes closed.

"Just so! Gangs and Camorrists everywhere!" And he lowered his voice mysteriously. "Why, do you know"—he hitched his chair along, bringing it so close to Maria Luisa's that she caught a strange odour of tobacco mingled with a violet perfume that he used on his beard and moustache—"do you know—I have a daughter, Andreina? Really, I shouldn't call her a daughter any more, for she has ceased to mean anything to me. Well, she tried to poison me once."

"Don't you believe him!" cried Valentina, interrupting with an incomprehensible vehemence. "Don't you believe him. He has a persecution mania . . . that is what ails him."

The professor turned on her severely.

"How dare you dispute me! Why, that day, in my soup, didn't I find—?"

"No, you didn't," cried Valentina. She was beside herself.

"What do you mean—I didn't? Is that the way you repay—?"

"Repay nonsense!"

"What do you mean, nonsense?"

"Papa, don't you see you are making a fool of yourself and of us before these people?"

"I, a fool of myself?"

They were both shouting, the father in a melodramatic pose, the daughter with a hard, resolute vehemence. Maria Luisa thought that her chance had come. She leapt to her feet as though borne by an irresistible impulse, and without trying to conceal her inner excitement, stammered:

"I'm sorry—I have to make a call. Your phone is in the hall, I believe?"

And all but unobserved in the family tumult, she slipped hurriedly out into the corridor.

IX

"I AM mad!" she thought, as she groped her way along the unlighted passage. "I am mad."

She could feel her heart galloping within her. She put her hand to her side and dug her fingers into the flesh, till she could feel the cut of the nails through her thin gown. "Where can his room be? And who knows—he may have gone out?"

She edged her way along the wall in the dark. Suddenly she collided with a chair, making a terrible noise, as she thought, though it was nothing as compared with the hubbub in the room she had left. No one, at any rate, appeared at the door there. At last her hand came in contact with an electric switch. She pressed the button, and a weak light came on far along the hall, shedding a yellowish glow from the low ceiling down over the green wallpaper.

Looking along the passage she saw that four doors led off from it, two to the right and two to the left. At the far end, gloomily brightened by the light, she could see the lock, the knob, and the grey-painted wood of the outside door. In addition to the overfilled and disorderly bookcases she had remarked on entering, she observed a large china cabinet, the top of which was packed with a variety of cast-off rubbish—a wheel from a baby carriage, a bird cage, an oil lamp, and a jumble of other articles.

"Which?" she wondered. But she was resolved to visit all the rooms one after the other till she found Carlino. The first door to the left was ajar. She pushed it open. "It can't be this one," she concluded, for the room was entirely dark. She was about to go on when it occurred to her to turn on the light. A narrow rectangular bedroom came into view, with a window with drawn curtains at the end. On the bed, lying prone, with his face buried in the pillows, she spied Carlino.

With an assurance and a deliberateness that are possible only at moments of extremest agitation, she softly closed the door and stood for a moment with her back against it, panting for breath, her eyes closed.

Carlino was not asleep; he was sulking. He had heard her enter, but thinking it was his sister, he plunged his head deeper into the pillows, as though to recover the darkness of which the turning on of the light had deprived him.

"What do you want?" he grumbled in a low whimpering voice, without moving. "Can't you let me alone even in my own room?"

The boyish violence of the complaint amused Maria Luisa. In spite of herself she smiled. Then hesitating a second and looking warily at the door, she reached out her hand and touched the youth lightly on a shoulder.

"I am not Valentina, Carlino," she whispered, bending over with another anxious glance at the door. "I am—Maria Luisa."

The boy turned over in one instantaneous movement, and sat up, with an astonished expression on his face, supporting himself against the wall. His pale cheeks were streaked with tear lines; his eyes, dazzled by the light, were red, his hair rumpled. For a moment the two looked at each other without speaking. Then Maria Luisa sat down on the bed.

"I came," she said, again pressing a hand to her racing heart, and lowering her eyes to conceal her excitement, "because I saw that you were unhappy, since you were not to leave with my brother. Tell me," she added, embarrassed, looking up and taking one of the boy's hands, "did you really want to come and live with me, along with Stefano?"

Her voice was low, hesitant, intense. The strange pressure of the burning hand upon his own, the fact that there, on his bed, in his wretched little room, he could see a great lady in a stylish hat and a fur coat, with a jewelled handbag under her arm, stunned the young man in such an incomprehensibly pleasing way that, still puzzled, still not understanding, he was as completely overcome as he would have been could he have foreseen what was about to happen. He could not speak. He could not take his hungry bewildered eyes from the great lady's face.

"Yes," he nodded.

"Well," continued Maria Luisa, in the same low, hesitant voice and, almost immediately, almost unconsciously in her nervousness, her fingers closed tight about his hand, "if you really want to, you can come just the same, without my brother. . . . Let's see now"—she lowered her head as if thinking; in reality her mind was empty, and she would have been incapable of a thought, let alone of speaking—"let's see now—tomorrow, in the afternoon!"

She paused and there was a moment's silence. Carlino, too, had dropped his head, and sat looking at his hand as it lay clasped in the woman's on the white coverlet of his bed. The woman's fur coat was open in front. One of her legs was extended, with the foot resting on the floor. The other was bent along the bedside. The skirt had lifted a little, and he could see the bend of the knee, lean, hard, almost masculine, but shaded and softened by the close-woven glistening web of the stocking. Dizzy, his ears buzzing, his head empty, he looked up at last. Maria Luisa was gazing at him fixedly, imperious, almost entreating. She lifted the boy's hand, pressed it hard against her cheek, and then, her face pale, earnest, her eyes closed, she began lightly to stroke her cheek with it.

In his utter stupor Carlino nevertheless grasped, at last, the meaning of all that. Impulsively, without a thought, he moved the hand with a nervous pull behind the woman's head and drew her towards him. Maria Luisa had not hoped to make such great progress so easily. His awkward and violent gesture pleased her. They kissed. Then she pushed him back, and with a leap was standing in the middle of the room.

She looked hurriedly around.

"Where is a pen? I must give you my address."

After such an incredible adventure the youth seemed to have lost his bearings in his room. He seemed not to know.

"Oh, a pen!" he finally repeated. "There—there's a pen! Look—you can write it in this."

Maria Luisa looked around. Most of the room was occupied by an old bureau, of a dark wood, with four drawers and a grey marble top with an oval mirror standing on it. Alone on the polished marble top lay a blue velvet pin-cushion which stood reflected in the inclined mirror, in order, apparently, that its uselessness and loneliness might be doubly emphasized. Farther along, near the window, was a little table with a red blotter, on which, in impeccable orderliness, lay a number of schoolboy's articles—an inkwell, pencils, a pen, books bound in blue paper, notebooks bound in black canvas. A case of shelves, with other books, was fastened to the wall above the table. Maria Luisa noticed that it was coloured with a green enamel that had come off in places, and that the red carpet under the table had been worn to the woof and showed spots here and there of faded ink.

She sat down and opened the copybook that the boy was holding out to her.

"In this, you say?" Nervously she glanced through the book. "What is this for? There is no chance of your teacher's seeing it?"

One of the things that had most impressed Carlino during the kiss was the same sweet and heavy perfume that the sensuous Stefano had found so pleasing. It was with double readiness, therefore, that he bent over the woman's fragrant shoulder.

"No," he said, with impatient, boyish petulance, "that's my practice book. The teacher never looks at it."

"And you won't talk of what happened just now, will you?" Her voice was hard, abrupt. "Can I rely on that?"

She dipped the pen and began to write. Just then the door swung open and Pietro stood in the doorway. He saw the woman busily writing, and the boy looking over her shoulder in an attitude that he judged passionate and deferential. A suspicion had dawned on him, on his companion's strange withdrawal from the room. It became a certainty in his mind.

"Maria Luisa!" he cried, in abhorrence. "It's time we were going!"

Carlino turned towards him with an innocent, curious expression that Pietro found hypocritical and provocative. Maria Luisa did not so much as look up.

"I'm coming," she said, continuing her writing. "Be so good as to wait for me out in the hall."

She laid down the pen and rose.

"Tomorrow then—about three!" she murmured. "This is the address." She sketched a gesture of farewell and hurriedly left the bedroom.

The light was still turned on in the hall, and Pietro was there, pacing up and down between the bookshelves and the china cabinet.

"We must say good-bye to my brother," said Maria Luisa, forgetting in her satisfaction the anger she had felt at Pietro for his peeping intrusion. Angry, fuming with a strong sense of reprobation, the young man followed.

The professor's quarrel with his daughter had reached a new stage. He was now accusing Valentina of keeping him in the dark as to the most important doings of the family.

"Here is another proof," he said, turning, but without breaking off, as the two entered the room, looking at them over the tops of his glasses. "Your sister Andreina, it seems, is up to something else, and this time not with the first-comer, but with a relative of our guest, with the brother-in-law, no less, of Signor Davico. I, naturally, am the last to know of it. And how, finally, do I know of it? Not, assuredly, through anything my daughter tells me, as I should have a right to expect; but accidentally from Signor Davico, who wants to know the address of Andreina! And I shouldn't complain, I shouldn't? Well, as I said, around me in my own home I find a conspiracy of silence."

Valentina was back to the wall again, with her hands stuffed into her apron pockets. She was surveying her father coolly.

"But you say that she is not your daughter any more. Well, if she is just a stranger, how can you care where she is or what she is doing?" She paused, then turned to Stefano and resumed: "As for you, how can I give you her address? I can't—I don't choose to. I have my good reasons for choosing not to."

"What are those reasons? Let's have the reasons!" said Stefano, who seemed not to have noticed the return of the two people either, so violent was the sensuous excitement that had taken possession of his fat face. "Just let us see how good your reasons are!"

"Oh, you know them better than I do," replied the girl, earnestly, bitterly.

"I certainly don't!" averred the sick man, taking up his guitar and trying the strings. "Tell her to give me Andreina's address, professor. It's really absurd that when I have known Andreina all these years I should be kept from calling on her."

"Eh, what have I got to say, mere father that I am?" answered Malacrida, frowning, pensive. Then turning to his daughter: "Valentina, Signor Davico is right. Your behaviour is quite unjustifiable."

The girl shrugged her shoulders without answering, but her eyes glared with an indignation that she could not control.

Maria Luisa stepped up to her brother and began, embarrassed: "So, good-bye, Stefano!"

"What? You here still?" he answered, with an ostentatious insolence, bending low over his guitar. "I thought you had gone. Good-bye! Good-bye!"

"Believe me, Stefano," she continued, not sure of herself. "You ought to go back to the sanatorium. There, surely, you would get well."

He kept at the pegs of the guitar for a moment, without heeding.

"So it's back to the sanatorium!" he then repeated, evidently trying to give his voice the most offensive intonation that he could devise. "Now I have no idea of doing any such thing. I am all right here, and here I stay. It's true," he added, suddenly throwing his mask aside, and revealing his deep hatred for his sister, "that I shall be somewhat better off, if you will make your visits as infrequent as possible. I have a feeling that your measly face of a betrayed wife brings me bad luck."

He did not raise his head from his instrument as he proffered that utterance in an offhand, merciless tone.

For a moment Maria Luisa seemed tempted to reply. Then she drew back from the sofa, biting her lips, and stood to one side.

It was Pietro's turn to take his leave. He had not liked the man from the start, nor had he been won by the virulent acrimony with which Stefano had responded to his sister's hostility. But, perhaps in compassion, perhaps out of curiosity, he saw fit to offer him his services.

"I hope you will let me call on you some time. When are you in?"

"You forget that I am an invalid," said Stefano, returning to his pathetic manner. "I am always in, therefore. Come when you like. It will always be my pleasure."

He fell silent. Then rolling his dull eyes towards the ceiling and swelling his squatty neck out through his open shirt front, he began to sing, thrumming his guitar. It was an old song, dating from just after the war.

For thirty nights I've not been sleeping . . .

And the chorus ran:

No, darling, no, not that way—
Let's bid farewell to love.
We're both unhappy that way—
Perhaps we'll meet Above.

The song must have reminded Stefano of happier, more prosperous days, for, from the first notes, his voice took on a sentimental, almost unchaste, tenderness. But quite to the contrary of certain emotions that spring from a fund of pure and justified sorrow and easily pervade a spectator, Pietro thought he had never experienced anything more revolting than this unexpected sentimentality on the part of that invalid. Of all Stefano's poses, he found that one the most false and the most repellent.

He looked around. Maria Luisa was nowhere to be seen. With a bow to Valentina and the professor, he hastened after her.

X

PIETRO's sense of disapproval sharpened within him with every step he took. Maria Luisa had no business to be establishing with Carlino the relations that she had been about to establish with him, Pietro, and from which he had managed to divert her only by a mighty effort of self-restraint! "She has gone completely mad!" he reflected as he followed after her down the stairs. "There is no other explanation for such a frenzy after seven years of married life." It was not only a feeling he had that he was in a better position than she to judge of what she should or should not do. His virtuous revulsion was also based on a sentiment that he was not aware of, and which was something in the nature of jealousy. He had not rebuffed Maria Luisa just to see her go and throw herself at a mere boy, Carlino!

By the time they were seated in her car again he had come to feel that he had not so much the right as the duty to let her know exactly where he stood. He began at once:

"You are not by any chance inviting that boy, the son of that schoolteacher, to your house?"

Maria Luisa had her head turned away from him. She reversed her position and surveyed him.

"And just why," she answered in an icy tone, "should I not invite him?"

"For the same reasons," Pietro replied calmly, "that I stated this afternoon, when I suggested that we remain just good friends. You are more or less off balance, Maria Luisa. You are doing all these things more out of pride and spite than because you have any real urge to do them. Now, with a sole view to your future peace of mind, I should advise you not to indulge certain insane whims that you will surely be sorry for afterwards."

What annoyed Maria Luisa was the young man's serene and philanthropic detachment. She could see nothing but pose and hypocrisy in it and was ready to go to any length to unmask him.

"Yes," she countered, seething, "insane things that you would now be willing to do yourself, in order to keep Carlino from doing them!"

"Which means?"

"Now, Pietro," she continued, changing to a tone of patronizing generosity, "don't try to be so deep! You think I don't see through you? You are jealous of Carlino. Try to tell the truth for once in your life!"

They looked at each other.

"You can think what you please," Pietro replied, firmly. "I am merely saying that no good can come of starting an intrigue with that boy, on grounds of mere pique. Listen to me! Let that child alone! Go back to Matteo!"

That destroyed any hope Maria Luisa might have had that Pietro could be brought to confess the jealousy she had ascribed to him. She thought, therefore, of attacking from another direction.

"What is good or not good for me is no concern of yours," she remarked dryly. "But I hope you won't try to tell me now that you are not just a vulgar climber."

By that time Pietro had almost forgotten that old accusation. He was duly pained to hear it revived.

"Why?" he said, reddening, and looking at her with eyes full of suffering. "You have no right to say such a thing. I don't know what you are referring to."

"So you are not a climber!" gloated Maria Luisa. "Well, if you are not, just tell me why you were so embarrassed when the professor identified you in there a moment ago, and said he had known your father."

Pietro had hoped that Maria Luisa had not been listening at that time. The thrust reached its mark. Just as Maria Luisa was attributing his rebukes to jealousy, so he could see in her persecution only the effects of a vengeful and persistent prejudice against him. However, he replied:

"Why do you think I was embarrassed?"

"Your face showed it. You would have liked to sink through the floor. That's why!"

A long silence followed. The car was now running silently along a wide, dark, deserted boulevard. Tall buildings almost without windows rose like walls on one side, while along the opposite sidewalk ran the grilled fence of the Public Gardens. Through the tree trunks that could be seen beyond the grating peered the lights and the coloured signs of a bakery-restaurant and dance-hall.

"You have come to be altogether prejudiced against me, Maria Luisa," Pietro finally protested, in a tone of acute distress. "That is why you insist on seeing only the bad things in me. Of the good you take no account."

"It's your fault, if anybody's," she replied, hard, indifferent. "You keep the good ones mighty secret."

She opened her handbag and rummaged about in it. Suddenly she turned on him, acidly:

"Do you know what another disgusting thing about you is? You do nothing but talk of yourself, think of yourself! How can you expect to be treated civilly when you show at every blessed moment that you do not know how to live?"

The car came to a halt in front of the restaurant.

"Let's get a drink of something," said Maria Luisa, curtly, leaping out of the car and stepping towards the lighted entrance of the establishment.

Pietro's anger and humiliation had reached a climax. He was tempted to take his leave then and there and walk away. But the same tie of rancour, the same mortal accursed fascination that had held him to her company all that afternoon, prompted him to follow her this last time. They pushed the mahogany turnstile and entered.

The restaurant was an affair of four smallish rooms, divided one from another by low movable partitions that were decorated to look like portières. It was crowded. They began to wander about from one compartment to the other looking across the smoky atmosphere and the maze of faces for an unoccupied table.

"Let's get a place near a window," said Maria Luisa, without looking around and almost to herself. She surveyed the throng of strangers with a sort of haughty vanity, as though half expecting that some man would rise and yield his place to her. Suddenly Pietro saw her stop and turn pale, as though she had grown dizzy and were trying to keep from falling. Then she gained control of herself and turned to him.

"Matteo is here with that girl," she said, in a low voice that was almost a gasp. Then a convulsive smile overspread her face. "Come, Pietro, let's sit down with them!"

Pietro's eyes followed her gesture. Near a window on the far side of the low, crowded room sat Matteo, in fact, with a woman, and in the woman he recognized, with an ease that astonished him after so long a time, an old schoolmate of his, Andreina Malacrida. He had not seen her for ten years, at least. But as often happens with persons whom one has known but slightly, who leave no associations of affection or dislike, and therefore make no very deep impression on the memory, he found her but little changed. That reflection was the matter of a flash. He was next conscious of the same odious fear of being recognized that had come over him shortly before at the professor's. Now as then he realized the baseness of the feeling, but he could not help perceiving, with disgusted humiliation, that it rose from his deepest instincts and could not be ascribed to any outer influence. But with it also came a feeling that nothing good could result from a meeting between Maria Luisa and her husband's mistress. He did not hesitate. Maria Luisa had already started towards the table. He overtook her and pulled her back frantically by the arm.

"What's the matter?" she asked harshly and in a loud voice, turning.

Her quarrelsome outburst attracted the attention of the people at the neighbouring tables. They suspended their own conversations and looked on.

"Maria Luisa," whispered Pietro, "do me a favour—don't go to that table! You know that your intentions are not good. Why provoke people?"

What her intentions actually were Maria Luisa could not have said. It was not jealousy. It was not anger, nor even embarrassment. It was perhaps a confused blend of those three feelings, and they found their common denominator in a powerful, aggressive discomfort. There was her heart pounding again! Images of cruelty and blood crowded into her mind under the racing productivity of a fancy that as a rule was exceptionally sluggish and inert. Instead of quenching the violent upflare within her, Pietro's words seemed to add kindling to it.

"You mind your own business!" she answered in the same loud and widely audible voice. As in the automobile, when she had tried to drive Pietro to the sidewalk, a blind dangerous light glittered in her eyes. "You heard me? I said mind your own business!"

Terrified by the fury that rang in her words, Pietro thought it wiser to make no reply. Side by side they approached the couple.

Matteo was sitting with his back to the entrance, bending low over the table and talking animatedly. Andreina was seated in front of him in such a way as to observe anyone who entered. She seemed to recognize his wife, for though she still listened with an uneasy stiffness to what he was saying, she kept her eyes on the pair of new-comers. They drew near. Maria Luisa stopped behind her husband's chair and eyed her rival fixedly. Andreina glanced at Matteo as though to say: "See who is here!" But already Maria Luisa had laid a hand on his shoulder.

"It's I, Matteo!" she said, looking at him with a wild expression in her eyes. "I hope I am not intruding."

The husband whirled with an impulsive suddenness, then slowly rose to his feet, reluctant, cold, well aware of what was about to happen, but disposed, at the very least, to postpone it.

"Not at all! Not at all!" he answered between closed teeth, avoiding his wife's eyes and looking at Pietro with a gaze that said: What on earth do you mean by coming here? to which Pietro's blink replied: I couldn't stop her. "On the contrary—delighted!"

"In that case," said Maria Luisa, seething, unable to catch her breath, "we'll sit at your table. . . . But introductions would seem to be in point," she added with venomous politeness.

Icy as before, constrained, Matteo introduced the two women. They shook hands. And then it was Pietro's turn.

He had sworn to himself that he would in no way betray the fear of being recognized that kept tormenting him in spite of himself. But as he took Andreina's hand he could not help meeting her eyes with an involuntary glint in which he immediately felt that his stupid dread had shown itself clearly and irreparably. At the same time, however, he noticed, with an impression that he was making an important discovery, an ill-concealed anxiety on Andreina's face, and in her fixed liquid eyes, as well, a cast of fear. Consciously, deliberately, her expression seemed to utter an entreaty that, to his great humiliation, had escaped his own mental lips: "Don't say anything! Let's pretend we've never met before!" Disgusted at such a vulgar complicity, Pietro laid his hat on a flower box on the window-sill and took a seat beside Maria Luisa.

For one moment all four sat in silence, each with his own thoughts. Then suddenly addressing Andreina, who sat opposite her, Maria Luisa began:

"Might one ask a question?"

Pale, subdued, Andreina raised her eyes.

"Do you mean of me?"

Maria Luisa looked at her fixedly. There was already a tremor in her voice.

"Yes, of you, if I may?"

A joyless smile ran over Andreina's thick lips as she shrugged her shoulders faintly to suggest: "For all of me you can!"

Maria Luisa lowered her eyes as though in an effort to frame her query. Actually she was trying to master a tumult of emotion that was swelling, swelling, inside her breast.

"My husband keeps winking at me! He wants us all to pretend that there is nothing unusual about this meeting. He wants us to act naturally. Now, frankly, I don't feel able to play that stupid game. I should therefore like to ask you: Is it true that Matteo has told you that you are to separate today and never see each other again?"

On pins and needles Matteo looked steadily at his mistress, trying to suggest, in such a way that his wife would not observe: "Tell her yes, and be done with it. That will get us out of this fix. Then we shall see."

But Andreina was overawed and did not heed. In a low, indistinct voice she murmured:

"Yes, he did tell me that."

An expression of disappointment flashed across Maria Luisa's tense quivering face. She had figured that Matteo had been either unwilling or unable to inform his mistress that they had to part, and hoped that she would have the pleasure of being the first to break the unpleasant news to her.

"Well, then," she pressed, nervously, recovering from the little upset, "did he also tell you why he feels obliged to desert you?"

Matteo had not been expecting that question. He frowned darkly, and gazed at his mistress in tense alarm.

"Yes, he told me why," Andreina replied quietly, after a moment.

Maria Luisa could not rest content with such a simple answer.

"What were the reasons he gave?" she insisted, in a rasping ironical tone. "That it had all been a dream, but that now it was time to get back to realities? That after all I was his wife, and that he could not forget the seven years we had been together?

That he had obligations towards the family, that he had duties towards me? He surely reminded you that a husband has duties towards his wife?"

Under the rain of questions Andreina sat motionless, with lowered eyes, wearing the pale drawn face of a woman who is in pain, who is wondering what can be the cause of it and is doing her utmost to keep from screaming.

"I might decide not to answer, you know," she finally replied.

Maria Luisa scowled.

"You can do as you please about that. I merely point out that you would be losing an opportunity to learn a few things that would be of the greatest interest to you."

But that argument was ineffectual. Pale, obstinate, Andreina sank sullenly into herself. Maria Luisa waited vainly for a moment; then she leaned over the table, her face livid from disappointment and an angry will to assert herself. She talked like a schoolmistress trying to impress a lesson on an inattentive pupil.

"My husband is deserting you for the simple reason that if he didn't, you would desert him. Yes—appearances to the contrary, my husband has not a penny to his name, not a penny. That suit he is wearing—I bought it. That necktie—I bought that for him too. He has nothing! I pay for every blessed thing he has or does. For that matter"—following an irresistible course, she could not help passing from violent words to physical gestures; she reached across the table, picked up the hem of the broad collar on Andreina's gown, and dropped it again—"for that matter, that dress you are wearing, that hat you have on—I bought them too."

"Keep your hands off me!" warned Andreina, in a low pent-up tone.

"I did not touch you—you are lying if you say I did!"

In spite of the mad violence of her manner, Maria Luisa seemed strangely bewildered and at sea with herself.

"But now," she concluded, panting, "I am tired of paying. That is why my husband is deserting you. Do you understand?"

A long silence followed. Maria Luisa, Matteo, and Pietro alike expected, though in varying mood, that Andreina would make some reply or other to the onslaught. She sat there with a pale obstinate face turned down upon the table, like a prisoner standing before a judge, and, more out of apathy than by calculation, refusing to make any answer or otherwise interest herself in the grave things that were being said to her.

Her silence astonished her three companions, but it had its strongest effect, undoubtedly, upon Maria Luisa. She interpreted her rival's tactics as an ostentatious display of indifference and contempt, and under the sort of sensuous fascination that a defenceless and apparently insensitive victim exerts upon the mind of a tormentor, she could feel a sanguinary and merciless cruelty taking possession of her in response to that sullen stolid obstinacy. She surveyed her rival up and down. What a satisfaction it would have been to lay a resounding slap on that stupidly sulking face, get her fingers into that curled hair, deliver a good solid blow with the heel of her shoe upon that hard head, that snaky body! There was no form of insult or violence of which she did not feel herself capable. But there was no way of venting her bloodthirsty sentiments directly. She therefore went combing her mind for some insulting remark that would be certain to penetrate the hussy's defence. Her voice took on an arch but poisonous politeness.

"I see, you think that silence is the best policy. It is a convenient one, I have no doubt. It prevents you from saying many things that you might find embarrassing later on. But I wonder if you would be good enough to explain one thing to me. How did you ever get to be a countess and go by the name of Caracci, when you are not married, and your father is an ex-high-school teacher whose name is Malacrida?"

Half out of fatuous vanity, half with the idea of making herself more eligible, Andreina had given Matteo to understand that she came of a family of run-down nobility in one of the provinces. Great, therefore, was her embarrassment, and correspondingly great the increase in her hatred of her rival, when she discovered that Maria Luisa was so well informed and at the same time so mercilessly bent on humiliating her in the eyes of her lover.

Paralysed with fear, with a mist before her eyes, but fiercely angry, she could not imagine what answer to make. Finally she said, without raising her eyes:

"I don't know what you are talking about. My father is not a teacher."

That answer filled Maria Luisa with the same sort of cruel but cautious mirth that comes over the hunter when, after many vain stalkings, he finally sees the game straying helpless within his range.

"What do you mean—he is not a teacher!" she returned aggressively. "He is, or at least he was. I have come this very moment from a visit to a person who is living with your family. I have just met your father, and, more than that, your sisters and your brother."

"I don't know what you are talking about," replied Andreina in a faint voice, her face paler than ever. "My family does not live in Rome."

Maria Luisa looked around the table with an expression of dramatic, triumphant astonishment. She brought the flat of her hand down noisily upon the table.

"So then—you say that I am a liar?"

"I don't say anything," answered the other. "You cannot have met my family, because my family have never lived here. They live in the country."

"Where?"

"At C——," and Andreina named a little village of central Italy.

But at that point Pietro thought that the torture had gone far enough. He decided to interfere in the victim's behalf.

"But Maria Luisa, what difference can it make whether this lady's family lives in Rome or somewhere else? Where shall we ever get, if we stop and thresh out every insignificant detail?"

"That's what I say," assented Matteo, relieved, and thanking Pietro with a glance.

But Maria Luisa did not see it that way.

"One thing we'll be getting at is the truth," she retorted, coldly, furiously. She turned on Andreina again.

"Listen to me now," she commanded in imperious anger. "Within the past hour I have met everybody in your family. I met your father, a bald lean man with a beard. He wears glasses and is, or was, a high-school teacher. I met your sister. Her name is Valentina. She's a woman about thirty years old, tall, rather stout. She's a nurse. Your brother's name is Carlino. He is about eighteen. Then a little girl came to open the door. She's probably your sister. Will you have something more? Shall I describe them in still greater detail? Now—do you still insist that I do not know your family?"

Pale, without moving, Andreina sat biting her lips, raising and lowering her eyebrows in frantic anguish.

"I didn't come here to be insulted," she finally answered, in a low, hardly audible voice. "I told the truth. I do not know the people you refer to."

"So you didn't come here to be insulted!" said Maria Luisa, leaning over the table. "Perhaps you think I came here to be insulted. You are trying to give the impression that I am a liar. Luckily I have a witness."

Quivering, panting, she turned towards Pietro. "You went with me, Monatti. Tell me whether we did or did not meet the family of this lady."

Pietro looked at Maria Luisa, then at Andreina. The latter still sat with lowered eyes, her face deathly pale, her thin nostrils quivering from her inner passion, her full youthful breast rising and falling in short powerful heaves under the pressure of her gruelling humiliation. In a rapid calculation Pietro judged that she was astoundingly beautiful and at the same time pitiable for the merciless torture with which she was paying for any harmless little fib she might have told. But in a second flash he realized that he had been asked a question and had to answer, and that by telling a lie he would more than even his score with Maria Luisa and make a long advance towards replacing Matteo in Andreina's good graces. Quick as that thought was, still quicker was the shudder of his conscience at its duplicity, so that he decided to tell the truth and corroborate Maria Luisa, only to remember that, after all, the important thing was to extricate that poor girl from her predicament and that really he ought to help her. Finally he said, in a casual, unexpressive tone:

"I'm sorry—I really cannot say, conscientiously, whether that was or was not the lady's family. Perhaps it was because I didn't pay much attention—you see, questions of that sort do not interest me. I don't remember that the subject came up while we were there."

"You don't remember hearing anyone say that the professor was Signora Caracci's father?"

"No, I really don't."

For a second everything was stupor and confusion in Maria Luisa's mind. In the pugnacious thrill of the moment she had quite forgotten all the reasons she had given Pietro for not being disposed to help her. Not knowing, therefore, to what she should attribute his astonishing conduct and also because everything that had happened at the professor's stood more or less clouded in the unreal and extraordinary atmosphere of her adventure with Carlino, she wondered for a moment whether she had not in fact dreamed everything. But then the whole sequence of events came back to her, and in an instantaneous and truly feminine intuition she grasped almost the whole truth: "I abused him and told him just what I thought of him. He is getting even. And that may not be all—he is capable of anything. He may be doing it in order to make up to that woman." As she sat with her eyes glued upon Andreina, her inner thoughts, as they passed from astonishment to comprehension, caused the expression of her face to vary from uncertainty to a most intense malice and hatred.

"So that's it!" she said, bitter in all her dignity. "In that case I can only be going."

As was her usual habit she had her cigarette-holder, her cigarette case, her lighter, and her lipstick scattered helter-skelter over the table in front of her. She brushed them into her handbag without speaking. Then she turned in an unexpected manner on her husband.

"You may be my escort, Matteo," she said, calm, theatrical. "Anyway," she added, sure of herself, "Pietro can see to getting Contessa Caracci home."

Matteo had explained to Andreina at too great length how necessary it was to pretend to satisfy Maria Luisa, and Andreina had involved him in too profound a deception for Matteo not to feel completely at his ease as regarded her. He would have been inclined, it is true, to urge Pietro not only to see Andreina home, but also to stay awhile and try to console her, since he could see how worried and broken up she was. But he could see that that was impossible in his wife's presence, and at the same time that he could rely on Pietro's intelligence. As on so many previous occasions, therefore, he made the best of a bad bargain and rose from the table.

The parting courtesies were cold and constrained. Maria Luisa drew to one side without bowing to Pietro and Andreina. Tugging at her gloves in the middle of the room, where the guests had thinned out, she stood watching her husband with a dull icy impatience. Matteo, embarrassed, offered his hand first to Pietro and then to his mistress. Then he joined his wife and disappeared with her into the mahogany turnstile at the entrance.

XI

By now the inner room in the tearoom was entirely empty, and the smoke-filled air was lying heavily on disordered groups of tables and chairs, deserted all. Motionless, oblivious of her environment and of the hour, Andreina sat looking at her table, and had it not been for certain twitchings of her face and the knit in her eyebrows and forehead, which betrayed the bitterness of her feelings more significantly than any more violent expression could have done, one would have thought that she was buried in a sentimental meditation with a lover and, having said all she had to say, was waiting with lowered eyes for him to speak again. Pietro too was unmindful of the hour and of the place they were in, but for reasons different from Andreina's. She was paralysed by hate. He was engrossed in an indescribable sense of pleasure and fascination that were inspired by the beautiful oval face in front of him.

The silence lasted for some minutes. Finally Andreina looked up.

"Shall we be going?"

Under the heavy gaze, so fraught with intention, Pietro felt, he could not have told why, a disturbance so powerful that it all but took his breath away. Unable to speak he merely nodded.

It was cold outside. The arc lights, stretching in line along the avenue, glistened in the limpid obscurity like great white fruits. Pairs of automobile lamps met and passed in silence, others hung motionless at the sidewalk curbs. Farther along, the broad sloping street made a majestic bend, and at the turn was the high, brightly lighted entrance of a big hotel. There was a certain press of traffic in front of it. An automobile was slowly turning, showing its two round eyes, while another was trying to approach the hotel. A third was waiting for these two to get out of the way in order to proceed along the avenue. As often happens on winter evenings, the air was singularly transparent. The night seemed to be filled with shining polished objects that dripped with light—automobiles, red and violet signs, show windows with varnished frames, street lamps. There was something precious about the blackness. Even the asphalt pavement seemed to be composed of a gemlike substance and revealed a certain grey glossiness as it rounded the curve.

The two walked along the sidewalk to the taxi-stand, Andreina slowly, superbly, her fur coat drawn tightly about her body. Pietro observed that many passersby turned and looked at her, and he could not repress a feeling of pride at that. Not for a long time had he appeared on the streets with a woman so beautiful.

However, as the girl continued in her neglectful reserve, he became aware that a sentiment of discontented reproof was rising in him. "I lied on her account," he thought, looking at her. "I lowered myself. Well, she ought to be told that I did it out of pity for her and not for any other reason."

Taking their time, they reached a taxi and got in. The vehicle was well on the way towards Andreina's, and still neither had spoken, Andreina seeming intent on ignoring the young man's presence, Pietro trying to find in his mind a sentence that would convey both its own allusion and his resentment. He did not get to it. Andreina was the one suddenly to break the silence.

"We have met before," she began, looking at him. "It was many years ago, at school—ten years, at the very least. However, I knew who you were the moment I saw you."

All the unpleasant things that Pietro had thought of saying vanished as if by magic from his thoughts. He felt a sudden sympathy flooding his spirit.

"Yes, it was all of ten years ago," he answered, hitching around on his seat in such a way as to face the girl. "And I recognized you too."

"I noticed that," she answered, calm, brazen. Then turning again, after a moment, she added: "Anyway, I'm grateful for the lie you told for me. All the more since you knew my family and could not have forgotten."

Discontented but pleased, Pietro gestured an "It's nothing," with his hand; but at the same time he thought that the girl seemed to be attributing the rescue to an interested motive on his part, and not to his pity for her. He could not help feeling a vague sense of discomfort.

"I would not have told a lie," he answered, "had I not felt that you were suffering, and that I would have made things worse for you by telling the truth. However, do not thank me. It's not a thing I am proud of." At that point he felt that he ought to mitigate the effect such words might have had. "In any case I have one consolation—the hope of having made a friend of you."

The woman had listened earnestly, with an attentive but incredulous expression. In the dark car he saw her smile at his last phrase.

"Of course!" she said, calm, froward. "We are friends, of course. What I don't understand is that you should be so worried about your motives in lying. Suppose you had lied not, as you say, out of compassion, but, for instance—because you liked me! Don't you think I would have been just as grateful?"

The remark did not please Pietro.

"It would have been all the same to you," he answered, "but not to me. I should not have lied, had I not really pitied you in view of the plight you were in. I might even say it was pity of a very special kind. I remembered that we had been schoolmates together, that we had once been friends, and other things besides. So I thought that we were, in a way, alike, that it was almost my duty to go to your rescue."

Andreina sat looking at him with fixed, earnest, attentive eyes.

"Yes," she returned, "I do believe we are alike." And she smiled. "We are alike in another respect—in that we are similarly situated. I am Matteo's mistress, and you are engaged to Sofia!"

In her smile, and in the intonation of her voice, there was a tremble of such anger and such gloating that Pietro could not help losing his composure again.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

He saw her smile.

"It's too long a story," she answered. "Suppose we do this. You have dinner at my house, and after that we can go into my sitting-room and have it all out at our leisure."

Pietro had been invited to dinner at the Tanzillos', but at just this moment he did not see how he could refuse. The taxi, moreover, had already arrived. As he alighted, Pietro looked up and perceived the little white building, with the windows on the first floor closed and dark. He suddenly remembered that, on a previous occasion, he had taken a walk with Matteo along that same deserted street that followed the Tiber shore, leaving him at that very house. The reminiscence gave him a twinge of anticipatory remorse, as though he were about to commit an act of betrayal.

Andreina, meanwhile, had swung the ivy-covered gate and entered the garden. After the wide boulevard outside, this tiny precinct, overgrown with an ancient, rambling vegetation, gave Pietro the same sense of a secreted world that he had once had on entering a convent cloister.

They climbed the steps, under the little porch with the flower box, and entered the hall.

"Who lives in these apartments?" asked Pietro, looking around.

"On the floor above," said Andreina, hunting for her key in her purse, "a Chinese family."

"Why Chinese?"

"You know—from the consulate." Andreina stooped over and fitted the key into the lock. "On the third floor there's an old woman. She never goes out."

They stepped through the door. Pietro was taking off his overcoat when the hall curtain was drawn aside and Cecilia appeared, her lips moulded into her usual winsome smile.

"The gentleman is staying for dinner tonight," said Andreina.

"In case the marchese calls or telephones, just tell him that I am not at home."

They went on into the sitting-room.

"Look," said Andreina, taking off her hat and glancing around. "I'll step into my room and take off my things. You wait in the parlour, there. Dinner will be ready soon."

She smiled and, passing a hand over her disordered hair, slipped away. She moved in her leisurely stride along the corridor to her bedroom, shut the door, and sat down on the bed. For a time she looked straight ahead of her at the floor, her hands in her lap, her face blank with a stunned expression. There was a raging despondency, a turbid discouragement, within her. That she could ever have thought for an instant that Matteo would marry her! Just then the notion filled her with hatred and contempt for herself, along with a bitter nervous mirth as at an insane pretension that could never have had any different results. She looked up. There on her commode was Matteo's picture, and for a second she had the angry thought of dashing it to bits on the floor. "The idiot!" she said to herself. "He talks of love and hasn't a penny! Idiot! Wretch! Liar!" However, she sensed the fatuousness of such impotent rage and restrained herself. Reaching over, she turned the picture squarely around, held it out in her hand before her, studying it fixedly, and with a hatred and a repugnance that she thought it would have been hard for anyone to surpass. She looked at it as in a daze, with her eyes wide open but seeing nothing, her lips apart. Suddenly her hand slipped from the night-stand and rested on the bed. She let herself down and stretched herself out, with her face sidewise on the pillow. For some minutes she lay there with her dry eyes swimming in a haze, her mind dark, arid.

Her real feelings she could not have described herself. She knew that she was suffering, intolerably, more than she had ever suffered before, perhaps because, with her illusions shattered and her hopes gone, she had no desires left and could think of no tangible reasons for her unhappiness. All her impulses, even the fits of anger and sadness to which she was accustomed, seemed to have been for ever replaced by a definite and raging sense of void that pursued her thoughts in all directions, and displayed a desert whichever way she turned. "It's a sign," she said to herself, "that I have reached the bottom," and she reflected, not without a frightened surprise, that she had never felt so desperate before. Towards Matteo, Sofia, Maria Luisa, all the others, she felt a distorted, obstinate hatred untempered by any of those justifications that a sense of offended justice suggests, the hatred of one who feels he is in the wrong, but has no desire, meanwhile, to be in the right. She recognized that those people had every reason to despise and insult her. At the same time she felt entirely justified in hating them and harming them. "Enough of hoping!" she thought angrily. "Enough of kindly, good-natured feelings! They get me nowhere! They are not for me!"

In truth, in a disaster so complete, nothing had any attraction for her, except a revenge that would be slow and perilous, a revenge that in striking those others would also fall upon herself. "Ruin them, one and all—and myself with them! No more hoping! Just black destruction!" She could feel her lips moving, as in a sort of prayer hurriedly uttered, conscious, meanwhile, of that same sense of strain and fright that she had experienced on one occasion, some months before, at the seashore, when she had taken a deep dive and found the water impeding her effort to reach the bottom. The bottom, this time, was a sort of self-satisfied and vengeful destructiveness, which seemed to have a strong and half-sensuous attraction for her; but she realized with a sort of irritated disappointment that the extreme depths of destroying bitterness, like the high peaks of happiness, would prove desperately hard to attain.

They would require at least an instrument, and a ferocious patience. She thought of the man who was waiting for her in the other room, and of the remark he had dropped: "After all, we are alike." In the darkness ahead of her a radiant fire-wheel seemed suddenly to burst into whirling flame in a far distance.

"There's my man!" she said, opening one eye and looking disgustedly along her body. What attracted her in the plan that was already forming in her mind was the interplaying series of ties and coincidences that would enable her to kill so many birds with one stone. Pietro—Sofia's fiancé and Matteo's friend! Sofia—Pietro's fiancée and Matteo's sister! Matteo—her lover and Pietro's friend! Maria Luisa—Matteo's wife, Pietro's friend, and the support of both Matteo and Sofia! They would all be betrayed, and the one by the other! They would all get what they deserved. No one of them would escape! "I will pretend!" she resolved. "I will pretend to do as Sofia says, in fact I will humour her to the limit, in her idiot's illusions. So too I shall do with Matteo, and so with them all! And meantime I shall try to obtain by violence what I have not obtained by deception; and in the end either I shall get what I want or the structure of lies will collapse, burying me among its first victims."

She heard a knock at the door. It was Cecilia. She was holding a dress-hanger in her hand and from it dangled a black satin gown.

"Are you putting this on, or one of the others?" she asked.

"That one," Andreina answered.

She rose, yawning, and looked at the maid out of heavy sleepy eyes. Cecilia's hair had once been a beautiful chestnut brown, but dyes and colourings had turned it to an impossible reddish blond. Under that wiglike display the girl's face might still have been attractive had it not been for an artificial unhealthy something that deprived it of freshness and youth. As one looked at her intently one saw, in fact, that her cheeks were somewhat puffy and too heavily powdered, that her eyes winked roguishly in a maze of little wrinkles of fat, while her everlasting smile failed of all real expressiveness and was entirely mechanical and masklike. Andreina had made the girl the indispensable accomplice of all her shady doings, and felt for her that mixed sensation of trust and dislike that the superior inevitably feels for the inferior who has been made a sharer in a secret. For some unexplainable reason the girl's hair angered her unutterably at just that moment. However, she restrained a comment and, standing in front of the mirror, allowed herself to be stripped of the gown she was then wearing. Then she sat down in her undergarments on the bed and extended her legs for the kneeling woman to change her stockings.

In that position Cecilia was bent forward so that all of her that Andreina could see was her breasts dangling inside her waist—they were of a milky white but too flaccid for a woman of her age—and then a perfectly round head with the hair rolled into a sort of helmet about her ears, a brighter blond at the sides, almost brown along the part in the middle. It was a display altogether vulgar in its general effect.

This time the mistress could not control her irritation.

"Tell me," she proffered, pushing the girl lightly on the shoulder with a foot, "when I get to be the Marchesa Tanzillo, do you think I can still keep you with a head of hair like that? You look like a street-walker."

"You forget," the girl replied calmly, without looking up, as she rolled a stocking down one of Andreina's plump hairless legs, "it was you who recommended that I dye my hair this way."

"Not that disgusting colour!" Andreina insisted, with growing anger. "You look like a street-walker!"

"You ought to know!" replied the girl, with sarcastic humility, resting her head on one shoulder, and heaving a sigh.

"Here I sit quarrelling with a servant girl," Andreina suddenly thought to herself, in utter dismay. "What a wretched life I am making for myself!" But that flash of vision was not adequate to the height of her irritation.

"You rat!" she returned, fiercely, in a half-whisper. "What do you mean—I ought to know?"

The girl looked up, her expression of offended dignity somehow emphasizing the absurdness of her make-up.

"All I mean is that I am here to work for you, but not to take your insults."

Andreina tossed her head and hitched about on the bed.

"Insults, insults!" she echoed harshly. "When you have nothing else to say, you say 'insults'! Take it as an insult if you wish, but if I catch you in that head of hair tomorrow, out you go into the street, to ply the trade you were born to. Do you hear that? . . . I've had enough of you now," she added, giving the girl a solid push on the shoulder with her foot, so that, being off her guard, the maid lost her balance and sat backwards upon the floor. "Get out! I'll dress myself. You—look after things in the kitchen, or else in the dining-room."

"What a wretched temper!" muttered the maid. But she smoothed her rumpled dress along her thighs, rose to her feet, and left the room.

Alone, Andreina looked with a staggered expression at her legs. On one, the stocking had been drawn up and fastened with the garter over the soft lace of her chemise. On the other, the stocking was only half-way on, the silken roll sagging lazily around her ankle. Between her feet she could see the bedmat with its symphony of red tints, and, beyond it, the dark commonplace mahogany of the bureau, and a segment of the frame of the looking-glass. The thought that she would have to dress herself alone gave her a great annoyance. She was tempted to call the maid back, though a sense of pride restrained her. The contrast of that banal irritation with her deeper desperateness pained her as a sort of measure of her black, hopeless unhappiness.

Suddenly the thought of Pietro returned, and she was seized with a great haste and a great frenzy to be at work on her plans for destruction and vengeance. She bent over, drew on the hanging stocking, rose from the bed, and began to dress. She picked up the black gown that Cecilia had carefully laid out on the bed, put it on over her head, arms first. In that position she found herself, for a moment, unable either to pull the garment down or to free herself from the silken sheath. She stood there, motionless, weary, half naked from the waist down, with her head muffled in the folds of the garment. "What wretchedness!" she thought automatically, opening her eyes wide into the darkness of the wrap about her head. "What a wretched life!" And she could not have said, herself, just why she chose that particular exclamation.

She sighed, shook herself, tried again, and finally had the garment on. Pulling at it here and there and smoothing with her hands the folds that gathered in the too adhesive cloth at her sides and on her chest, she looked at herself in the mirror. It was an evening gown, without sleeves, cut low in the back almost to the girdle. She could not help noticing with satisfaction the fine effect of her plump white arms against the black silk, and of her slender back, broad at the shoulders, narrow at the waist, and sloping inward above her hips.

That feeling of complacency again led her back to a thought of Pietro. "I am beautiful!" she mused, picking up a bottle of perfume and sprinkling her neck, breast, and ears with it. "I am beautiful! That will be a fine tool for the task before me!"

She laid the perfume away on her bureau, went over her lips again, pulled her dress down in front, in order to give a little prominence to the swelling of her breasts. Then, considering that she had suitably cleared for action, she walked out of her bedroom.

XII

SHE went, not to the alcoved sitting-room where Pietro was waiting, but to the dining-room. This was the smallest room in the apartment, so small that the round table almost filled it, leaving barely enough space between the edges and the walls for the passage of a person. There were two chairs, one to the left, the other to the right of the door. The walls, papered with a dark flowered design imitating damask, were otherwise quite bare. The one ornament was a tripod stand in a corner near the window. It carried a flowerpot with a heavy plant that looked like a cucumber vine.

At dinnertime Cecilia usually put on the tablecloth, set a place for one person, and then drew one of the chairs up to the table. Andreina would sit facing the window and begin to eat, served by Cecilia in white gloves and a lace apron. The window was too large for such a tiny room. During the forenoon it admitted an annoying sleepy light through the white curtains. Evenings Andreina followed fashion by fits and starts and in a way of her own. She would have the room lighted with two silver candlesticks with two holders each. She would eat distractedly, slowly, dropping a remark to the maid every now and then, and the maid would answer from her post, back to the wall, near by. At the end of the meal Andreina would wet her lips and the tips of her fingers from a finger bowl. Then Cecilia would bring in a little silver tray on which were a plate of cigarettes and a lighted candle. Andreina would take a cigarette, light it from the candle, and then get up and go into the sitting-room for coffee. Such melancholy repasts were the ordinary rule. On rare occasions Matteo would stay to dinner or she would invite a friend—a middle-aged widow who lived alone, as she did.

She found the table already set and the candles lighted. Cecilia was placing the doilies under the plates with demonstrative signs of ill-humour and offended vanity.

"Is everything ready?" asked Andreina, frowning.

"Everything!" answered the girl, frowning back.

"In that case, don't stand there dawdling," said Andreina, taking up the water bottle. "Go and sound the gong."

Making no answer, with the sigh of a suffering soul unjustly abused, Cecilia went to the sitting-room, drew back the two wings of the folding-door, and fastened them with hooks to the wall. Then without a glance at Pietro, who looked at her in amazement from his seat on the sofa across the room, she hurried back to the dining-room, took a rather large gong from a nail, and gravely struck it three times. Those complicated operations roused the young man from his meditations. He rose, and with some hesitation stepped to the wide-opened door.

He saw Andreina standing in an artificially careless pose, as an unconcerned hostess, watering the plant in the flowerpot from the water bottle. The tripod stand was rather tall, and her uplifted arm adapted itself to the inclination of the bottle as it emptied. She brought her figure in line with that movement by bending her head over her left shoulder. Finally she turned and seemed to become aware of Pietro's presence.

"Stop looking around!" she commanded, examining the water bottle for a moment and then setting it back on the table with a disgusted movement of her arm, as though it were something not fit to be touched. "This furniture goes with the house, and everything is appropriately horrible. Only a few trinkets are mine."

They sat down. Pietro observed that the woman's downcast eyes were sad, and that a yellowish pallor overspread her heavy oval face. But her body, under its garment of glittering satin, seemed younger and more resplendent than ever, and in its own mute and joyous language pleasantly belied the gloom of her features. The corners of her mouth twitched slightly. The flickering candlelight lent a hard, desperate fixity to her face. Her dim dreamy eyes seemed to say: "I am tired of living." But Andreina had only to stretch out her arm to pour the wine for her majestic body to writhe and palpitate as though suddenly aroused from slumber, and for her breast, impatient of the low-cut bodice, to swell full and naked in a powerful respiration that seemed to say: "I enjoy living. I am happy to be alive. I am young. I am going to live."

Pietro's eyes could not get their fill of her. "What a stunning creature!" he thought, almost terrified. He could feel his heart thumping with great beats. His breath came short, and his eyes congealed into a hungry half-impudent stare.

Suddenly he remembered that he had been invited elsewhere.

"I have to make a telephone call," he exclaimed, greatly distressed. "Really, the Tanzillos expected me for dinner tonight. I ought to let Sofia know that I shall not be there."

"What are you going to tell her?" asked the woman, coldly.

"That I am detained at the paper," he answered, readily enough.

He at once regretted having made just that reply. He saw her raise her eyes and look at him for a moment with a strange contemptuous satisfaction.

"Two lies in one day, on my account!" she mused, slowly, significantly. "Well, go and telephone. It's in my room—that means the first door to the right, off the hall."

Hurriedly, and not a little humiliated, Pietro started to make his call. The door off the hall to the left was wide open. It led to the kitchen and Pietro could see Cecilia in her apron and white gloves arranging plates and tureens on the marble-slabbed table with certain dainty gestures of her own. Andreina's room was dark. Pietro turned on the light, sat down at the head of the bed, and picked up the telephone. He did not dial the number, however. For a moment he sat motionless, gazing doubtfully into space in front of him.

Lying again! No, he did not like to lie, were it only to prevent the gloating of that deep Andreina! His eye fell on Matteo's picture that was standing beside the telephone. "Oh," he thought, "that might be a way out!" He would telephone not to Sofia but to Matteo—and he would tell him the truth, namely, that he was staying on at Andreina's to cheer her up in her dejection after the encounter with her rival. That would leave the task of lying to Matteo. "And it would be the exact truth!" he reflected, by way of a conclusion, looking at a chair that had been fitted in between the wall and the bureau and on which some garment or other—pink—had been tossed—a chemise? a nightgown? "If I hadn't pitied her, I wouldn't have lied, I wouldn't have brought her home, I wouldn't have stayed to dinner."

He dialled the number and Matteo was soon at the phone.

"Listen, Matteo," Pietro began, not without being conscious of a ring of falsity in his very offhandedness. "I am here at your girl's. She has been pretty badly hit. I have decided I had better stay to dinner and cheer her up a bit."

"You surely are a friend in need!" answered Matteo, and Pietro caught from his bitter depressed tone that something serious must have happened between him and his wife. He also observed that in Matteo's voice there was a boundless trust, an absolute lack of curiosity or suspicion, and his conscience gave him a stinging thrust. Meanwhile, at the other end of the wire, Matteo was asking whether he could not see Pietro in the course of the evening.

"Surely," the latter answered, without hesitation. "I am going to the reception with you all. I shall not be more than an hour here. . . . By the way," he added thoughtlessly, "if Sofia asks you why I am not on hand at dinner, just tell her I am detained at the office."

Matteo agreed, and Pietro laid down the telephone.

For a moment he sat motionless, looking straight ahead. He felt, certainly, a great relief, but it was the relief rather of a man who has successfully managed an intrigue than of a man who has honestly done a friend a favour. It was not only a sense of deceit. He was worried by the emotion he could not help feeling every time the thought of Andreina's beauty crossed his mind. And he went back to the dining-room with those two vague and uncertain thoughts stewing in his mind.

Andreina was sitting at the table, stiffly erect, gazing steadily at the two flickering candle flames. She seemed to be absorbed in an icy meditation and did not look at him till he was in his place again.

"Well, you told your lie?" she asked, earnest, calm.

"I told the truth," Pietro answered, with a smile.

"What would that be?"

"I told Matteo that I was staying here, because I thought you were very blue, and that I had better keep you company for a while."

"You call that the truth?" asked Andreina, inattentively.

"Why, yes—why not?"

"Nothing. I was just wondering what you meant by the truth. And Matteo—what did he say?"

"What should he have said? That it was all right."

There was a moment's silence.

"So then," Andreina finally resumed, and, though she made an effort to seem calm, her voice suddenly took on a querulous tone, "so then, your idea is to console me! But who told you I needed consolation?"

They looked at each other. It was clear that Andreina was put to it to maintain a serene composure, that really she was boiling. There was a stare about her eyes, which she opened too wide. The corners of her mouth were trembling, and an expression of dejection and offended dignity had replaced her usual air of resolve. Pietro felt himself flooded with a new wave of sincere, brotherly compassion.

"Your face tells me so," he replied warmly, "and your manner." He leaned over the table, and laid his hand affectionately on hers. "Why try to pretend with me?"

Andreina made no answer but, passing with unexpected rapid-ity from her excitement to an air of cold and deliberate allurement, she gazed at him steadily, turned her hand over in his, ran her fingers between his fingers, and pressed her nails into the palm of his hand.

Just then the door opened and Cecilia appeared, carrying a dish in each hand. Disconcerted by the woman's quick responsiveness, Pietro freed his fingers. He saw Andreina shake her head in refusal of the food that the maid was setting before her.

"You are not eating?" he asked.

She again shook her head.

"I couldn't—I am not hungry. But you eat. I had dinner prepared especially for you."

"In that case I won't eat either," he replied.

"No, no, please!" Andreina insisted, but with no great warmth. "I will watch you. There's nothing wrong about that."

"Well," answered Pietro—a third lie—"I'm not hungry either."

Andreina smiled.

"Really? You are not just saying so?"

"Really."

"In that case, let's go into the sitting-room." She rose from the table. Then she turned to Cecilia, who was still standing with the plates in her hands looking on in stupefaction. "You can clear things away and close the doors. Then you can go to bed. I'll show the gentleman out." And followed by Pietro she stepped into the sitting-room.

The central chandelier was turned on and a dim uniform light spread over the room. Moving languidly, with a deliberate, almost ritualistic slowness, Andreina went to the alcove, turned on the little lamp with the shade, then stepped to the door, put out the centre light, and finally returned to the sofa and cuddled up in a corner among the cushions. Pietro stood in the middle of the room, looking at her.

"Come and sit beside me here," she said. And as soon as he had obeyed, she resumed with a wan smile: "You were saying in the taxi that we were just like each other. I think so too. But perhaps

—or rather, certainly—you have a conception of the similarity that is wholly different from mine. The floor is yours, therefore! Why, in your opinion, are we like each other?"

"It's this way," Pietro began. "You must remember——"

"Let's say 'thou' to each other," the woman interrupted, brusquely. "We knew each other as children. Besides, it's better anyhow—one talks more easily."

The suggestion was quite to Pietro's liking, but since it brought him back to the notion of a seduction, he hesitated for a moment, looked steadily into the woman's eyes. Andreina was calm. Nothing about her indicated any ulterior intention.

"Do you remember," he continued, with a show of animation, "when we lived in the same house and went to school together?"

"Do I remember!" she answered, smiling again in her discouraged, ill-humoured way. "Up at dawn in cold weather, going out half asleep and half washed, with a pile of books under one's arm! Meeting on the stairs, or at the tobacco shop on the corner, and then a walk together to the door of the high school! There the teacher always telling me that I must not expect to be better treated than the others because papa was a teacher in the same school! Then that smelly air in the classroom! And recess time! And my black apron with my name embroidered on the bodice in front! And examinations, those examinations!" Andreina's face re-formed into an expression of loathing, and her eyes settled upon a point in space somewhere in front of her. They were hard, thoughtful. "There are idiots," she resumed, "who spend their time mourning over their schooldays as the happy, carefree time of their lives. I look back upon them only with disgust, and the longer I live and the farther they recede, the more my hatred grows. Nothing on earth or in the heavens above could ever induce me to live them again."

There was a strange intensity in the resentment she thus expressed. Pietro was cowed by it. He sat looking at her, hesitating.

"You may be right," he finally resumed. "At any rate, they are the first thing we have in common, at least as regards externals.

We went to school together. We both came from families that were poor and humble, but eager to improve their lot, get on in the world. We were of the same age, too. After that we lost track of each other. Now, isn't it curious? Here we meet again after all these years, and though we have led altogether different lives surely, we find ourselves in approximately the same situation, as though we had followed two different roads to arrive at one same destination."

Andreina sat looking at her hands with a cold, self-contained expression, seeming neither to agree nor disagree with the propositions that had been set before her. She confined herself to asking:

"What would the destination be?"

"The point where we are both mistaken for things that we are not," he replied, with sincere warmth and resentment, suddenly remembering that they had both been outrageously abused by Maria Luisa that afternoon. "We have the common fate of always acting unselfishly and in good faith, and of always finding ourselves accused of selfishness and bad faith. The more we show ourselves as we really are—simple, naïve, generous—the more we are suspected of shrewdness and scheming. . . . I felt that so strongly," he added, warming to his theme, "that when I was forced to answer Maria Luisa's question and you looked at me entreatingly, I was immediately certain that, appearances to the contrary, the right was all on your side. I was therefore able to lie glibly and almost with gusto. . . . Tell me," he concluded, bending over towards her, "don't you think I am right? Don't you think that the main thing we have in common is that we are less selfish, less self-centred, than others, and that that is why we are disliked and misunderstood?"

Andreina had listened to him with an increasing and more and more evident coldness. She replied simply, raising her eyes:

"No, I am not of that opinion at all." Her lips tightened as she again dropped her eyes to her hands. "There was nothing noble or disinterested in my denying today that my family was in

Rome. Had I admitted the truth, that idiot of a Matteo would surely have ended by looking my family up. Then he would have discovered that I am not a countess and that my name is not Caracci. But he would also have discovered that when we first met I was not the virtuous angel I pretended to be. There you have the whole story. Ingenuousness? Unselfishness? They have nothing to do with the case."

Pietro's dark intense eyes filled with compassion, and he answered in a tone of mingled affection and reproof:

"But they have, they have! Do you think that if you were as selfish as you pretend to be you would be accusing yourself so frankly? Your severity towards yourself proves your unselfishness."

The woman looked at him almost as if he had insulted her.

"Don't try to be nice to me," she exclaimed with a self-satisfied bitterness. "I know that I am wicked, hopelessly wicked, as wicked as I can possibly be, and I could quote you chapter and verse to prove it." Her lips trembled. "Nor could one say that the fault is not mine, that circumstances are responsible for my being what I am, that life has not treated me fairly—you know, all the things that people think up to whitewash themselves. I remember perfectly well that, when I was ten years old, I was exactly what I am now—just as good a liar, just as shameless, just as greedy for the good things of life. I don't remember, of course, but I am quite sure, that I was no better at five, nor even at two. . . . No," she concluded, looking down at her hands again, "I know myself pretty well, and I know that my soul is chock-full of scheming, lying, meanness, wickedness—just the opposite of what you think. When, therefore, I say that we are alike, I mean nothing more nor less than that you are as bad as I am. When I say that, notice, I am not judging you. On the contrary, I like you that way, and want to be friends with you for that very reason."

Taken aback, Pietro could not remove his eyes from the cold, resolute oval face that was framed by the corner opposite him.

"Just what do you mean?" he finally asked.

"I mean," Andreina replied, "that we are alike, but in the bad things, not in the good."

Pietro was quite off his balance.

"One can say anything," he countered. "The hard thing is to prove what one says."

"Will you have an example?" said Andreina, calm, ready. "It is not hard to find. There you are engaged to Sofia Tanzillo, are you not? I, on my side, am the mistress of Sofia's brother. Now the proof you are seeking lies in the fact that our conduct towards Sofia and Matteo respectively is precisely identical. I have always despised Matteo. I think he is a weakling and a fool. I have stuck to him strictly out of considerations of interest, hoping that, some day or other, being as much in love as he is, he would finally get his present marriage annulled and marry me. Now I am sure that you became engaged to Sofia in exactly the same spirit and for the same reasons—reasons of money and social ambition, but having the very same opinion of her that I have of Matteo. . . . But as though that resemblance were not enough," she added, with her discouraged smile, "we now discover that the Tanzillos are beggars, that everything belongs to Maria Luisa! All our lying and treachery has served no purpose therefore, and we are both left high and dry without a penny—I with Matteo, you with Sofia, two dead weights that we can drag along after us for the rest of our lives."

Her last phrases tore Pietro from the dazed astonishment into which her diatribe had plunged him.

"No," he exclaimed impulsively. "Sofia will not be a burden to me. Maria Luisa stands pledged to give her an adequate dowry."

He saw the woman's face wreathe itself in a hectic, ironical smile.

"You see how right I am!" she laughed. "Can you pretend that a man truly in love would have worried about a dowry?"

Pietro bit his lips. "What if Andreina were right?" he asked himself, in fright. "What if we are really alike in the way she says?" What most annoyed him in the woman's indictment was that it did not differ greatly from the charge that Maria Luisa had laid against him earlier that afternoon, in a different spirit and for wholly different motives. Shaken, he gazed at Andreina, at that pale, ardent, self-confident face, at those eyes with the heavy unavoidable stare, meanwhile running mentally over the whole course of his relations with Sofia in hopes of finding some episode, some detail, that he could quote to refute the woman's accusation and at the same time strengthen him in his own convictions. But it often happens that when people set out to change their views, or at least come to find them untenable, and go back to examine the facts that inspired them, they discover that the facts themselves have changed, somehow taking on a different colour from the one they had seemed to have at first. So as Pietro reviewed his relations with Sofia he suddenly became aware that there was not one detail in his conduct towards the girl that could not be ascribed to motives of interest rather than of affection. There was nothing clear, nothing definite, to be sure, on which he could base such a suspicion. He was still far from being able to think of Sofia in such terms of frank and deliberate deception as seemed to inspire Andreina's conduct towards Matteo. But he was already aware that the carefree and superficial indifference that had so far enabled him not to probe his attitude towards his fiancée was at an end, and he was ready to admit that if his relations with her were not based on interest, there was still something unconsciously *ad hoc* and provisory about them. However, he did not care to let Andreina see how deeply she had disturbed his complacency.

"No, no! It isn't true!" he protested. "I have always loved Sofia sincerely."

With a quick movement that expressed half-anger, half-aggressiveness, Andreina slipped along the sofa to his side.

"You won't try to tell me that she's beautiful!" she began, looking him searchingly in the eye. The nearness of her cold white face, as frigid as a spent star, was a great embarrassment to Pietro.

"No," he admitted, "she is not a beautiful woman."

"Why don't you say she's a fright?" pressed Andreina. "Bowlegged, hollow-chested, a rotten complexion, a horrible mouth! If you come to her disposition, I must say that I find it still harder to comprehend how anybody could love her."

"Why?" asked Pietro, panic-stricken. "She's a kind soul, intelligent——"

"Intelligent, that woman?" returned Andreina, forcing her advantage, hungry for gore. "That woman is half-witted! You simply do not see her! Why, she's a dunce! Do you want an instance? Look, I must tell you that this very afternoon she honoured me with a call here. Now, I could give you a thousand guesses, but you would never imagine the reason she came. It was something incredibly silly and absurd! Imagine! She, Matteo's sister, calls on me, Matteo's mistress, in order to persuade me, as sweetly as you please, to give up her brother! And could you guess why? Because it would be better for Matteo if I did, it would make Maria Luisa happy! Tell me if you still think her intelligent, after that!"

The violence of her manner somehow overawed Pietro, though his inclination to rebuke her was not as strong as his compassion and his curiosity.

"Well," he asked, "what did you say?"

"I told her, of course I would!" answered Andreina with a short pitying snicker. She bent forward as though thinking of something. Then suddenly she straightened up. A deep morbid excitement seemed to have laid hold of her. Her breath came hard, laboured, her chest heaved powerfully, as though something were stifling her. Her lips were trembling, giving her whole face an expression of inspired entreaty.

"You cannot love that woman!" she resumed, speaking rapidly in a low voice, moving closer to the young man, and laying a hand on the lapel of his coat. "You are my sort of person. People like Matteo and Sofia you can only hate. Help me to get even with them! Let's pretend to do as they say, and then betray them both. Don't tell me you love her! You don't!"

That appeal, but even more so all that Andreina's personality as a whole suggested, filled Pietro less with anger than with a comprehending and sympathetic pity. "What an unhappy creature!" he mused, sorrowfully. "How wretched!" On the other hand he was quite pleased with himself for feeling as he felt in the presence of such a person, and wished that his critics could only have seen the inside of his soul just then. "Ambition?" he thought self-righteously. "Calculation? The truth is that what you find deep down in me is an inexhaustible fund of generous, perhaps ingenuous, impulses." Gently, therefore, if, to be sure, with a firmness appropriate to his indulgent understanding, he tried to find an answer to the woman's mad proposal.

"No, Andreina, do not expect any help of that kind from me!" And he shook his head decisively. "And least of all against Sofia! I love her."

"Never mind!" answered Andreina in the same subdued but urgent tone. "Never mind! We can leave Sofia aside for the time being, since you say you love her. But help me just the same! That is all I ask of you. Anyway, before very long you'll see, and you will not be saying that you love her. You'll see that it has all been a game, and a not very creditable game, that you have been clutching at Sofia for the very same reasons that I have been clinging to Matteo."

She spoke with her head lowered and turned a little to one side. Suddenly the hand that had been resting on his coat lapel, groping along the seams and folds as though its owner were blind, came to life and gradually made its way up towards his shoulder. Pietro was also sitting with lowered head. Against the dark fabric that covered his chest he could see the hard slender whiteness of the girl's wrist broaden and grow softer as her arm rose towards his shoulder with the sinuous, adhesive, possessive moving of an uncoiling serpent. The slowness of the gesture and Andreina's posture, with her body bent forward and her face turned away as in shame, quite deceived Pietro as to her intention. Almost involuntarily he circled his arm lightly about her waist. But that was enough for her to throw herself suddenly upon his neck with a wild violence that somewhat disconcerted him, striking him as an unchaste allurement rather than as an act of passion. They kissed and then drew back. Pietro saw the woman raise her head, look at him, and then say with a steady haggard gaze:

"What if Matteo and Sofia were to see us!"

The bewilderment left by the kiss passed and, as Pietro realized what had happened, he was flooded with disgust for his own double infidelity, and with pity for the ghastly unhappiness in which he thought the woman was writhing without any positive will to free herself.

"No," he said, rising to his feet, panting, "I think I had better tell you at once, Andreina. All this is not to my liking."

As Pietro threw her off, Andreina fell over on one side, on the sofa, with her face resting on an arm. She did not move.

"What is not to your liking?" she asked finally, opening her free eye and looking at him.

"This whole business!" he answered, annoyed. "I have nothing against Matteo, and I truly love Sofia. Furthermore, I do not think I am the monster you say I am." There was a tremble in his voice, because he thought he had never had such a clear conception of the gulf that yawned between his innocence and the wickedness of other people. "I will help you," he added, suddenly seized, in spite of himself, with fear of losing Andreina. "I will help you in any way I can, but not in any such plans as the ones you mention."

Andreina did not raise her head.

"In that case," she suddenly exclaimed, in a tone of contempt, "go away! Run to your Sofia!"

To Pietro's own surprise her words filled him with a frigid anger.

"That is what I am doing," he said, and in a second he was through the door and into the hall.

"How simple everything is after all!" he thought, struggling into his overcoat. He clearly perceived that he did not regret losing Andreina's love, that he was truly sorry to be leaving her in such abject despair, and that he was pleased to note such virtuous sentiments in himself. But he had not had time to turn the knob on the outside door when Andreina appeared in the doorway of the parlour. Her hair was in disorder. She had a hand to her forehead.

"Don't go!" she said slowly, and she placed herself between him and the door. "I won't talk of Matteo and Sofia any more," she continued, lowering her eyes in a humble, shamed manner. "I will do anything you wish. But stay—and love me a little."

Pietro looked at her in astonishment. She stood there with her back and her two hands against the doorjamb, her head bent to one side, her eyelids closed, and a thick wisp of hair dangling down over her forehead. She was breathing hard. At that picture, his compassion, and that vivid sense of similarity, understanding, brotherliness, which made him feel that he could look at Andreina more indulgently, more humanely, than anyone else ever could, came over him again. His first impulse was to yield to her entreaty.

"I do love you, Andreina," he answered, deeply moved. "But for the very reason that I love you, I do not like the things you say."

"Then you will stay?" she asked, looking up, greatly relieved.

But Pietro remembered that he had promised Sofia to take her to the ball that evening.

"No, I can't stay now," he answered. "I have an engagement. I won't be free till—till midnight. I could come back at midnight. Shall I?"

"Yes," said Andreina, without lowering her cold, heavy gaze.

"Till later then!" he said, reaching for the doorknob. But Andreina interfered again to throw her arms about his neck. Pietro was too happy, and also in too great a hurry, to resist this second embrace. They kissed. Then Andreina opened the door and he went out. But when he noted the expression of secretive complicity on the woman's face as she whispered a good-bye, it suddenly occurred to him that once again his innocence had been trapped by the wickedness of others, and with that thought revolving in his mind he dashed through the hall out into the garden.

XIII

PIETRO had lived for many years in one of the large hotels in town, where, thanks to his status as a newspaperman and to a distant family relationship with the manager, he had obtained a small room on the top floor at a very low rate. In those now faraway days he had chosen the lodgings—apparently so splendid and so disproportionate to his earnings, actually so ordinary and so humiliating—out of youthful vanity, and a desire to impress people with his grandeur. But as time wore on he discovered that that calculation, like so many others that he had made in his callow, inexperienced youth, had gone wide of the mark. The advantages of having such an address in no way compensated for the annoyances. However, partly out of inertia, partly with an eye to the low rental, he had never moved, and finally he had grown accustomed to the inconveniences of hotel life and actually come to like them, a sign, he sometimes thought by way of self-justification, that his was a free, unsettled temperament indifferent to discomforts and hardships.

It was not far from Andreina's to his hotel, but since it was late and he still had to dress, he hailed a taxi that was cruising slowly along the river boulevard. The trip must have seemed too paltry to the driver, because Pietro heard him mutter something of which he caught only a phrase—that he could just as easily go that far on foot. He replied with a sort of gay, exhilarated contemptuousness:

"But supposing I prefer to ride?"

The taxi-driver shook his head and made no answer. It was still some moments before Pietro realized that the gay excitement with which he was inwardly thrilling was born of his adventure with Matteo's mistress.

He found the hotel lobby crowded with a ceremonious, pretentious throng. Men in dinner jackets, with their overcoats on their arms and opera hats in their hands, were pressing in front of the coatroom, while groups of women in evening gowns were standing or walking pompously up and down on the thick, soft carpets with a pretence at gay conversation. New arrivals kept pouring through the revolving mahogany turnstile. Faintly through the curtained glass partition of the inner rooms came the sound of an orchestra, with its suggestion of expensiveness and of the vulgar glare of an overlighted ballroom.

Pietro remembered that it was ball night at the hotel, and while waiting for the lift he began to observe the guests. Of their wealth there could be no doubt, but it seemed to be a recent money, not yet quite sure of itself. The women were good-looking and well dressed, and the men would have passed very well for fashion plates. But there was something hesitant, vulgar, superficial about them, and it seemed to efface most of their other traits. The men wore their hair too brilliantly glossed, too smoothly combed, and their moustaches were clipped too smartly to the line. Even when they were lean the women seemed too well fed, and the faces that glimmered through the layers of paint and powder were so inexpressive that one was tempted to seek their characters rather in the youngish, sensuous lines of their figures. This vulgarity was familiar to Pietro, for he knew the sort of people that frequented these semi-public hotel balls. But at just that moment the exhilaration of his adventure with Andreina gave him a sense of detachment, so that the scene impressed him as a parade of lower and only too comprehensible instincts. None of these men were as lucky as he was, none of these women as beautiful as Andreina! Standing with his hands thrust into the pockets of his overcoat he watched them troop off towards the ballroom with the submissiveness peculiar to people out for a good time, and he was so absorbed in his own reflections that he quite forgot the lift, till it suddenly opened behind him. He came to himself and stepped hurriedly into the lighted car. The doors closed and the ascent began.

The first shock to his inner state of bliss came from a glance into the mirror opposite him. A semicircular blotch of red disfigured his lower lip—the imprint of Andreina's kiss. Mortified at having appeared in public with such a telltale marking, he lowered his head and covered his face with his handkerchief. Then suddenly he became aware that his exhilaration also contained a bitter something that stood half-way between disgust and remorse. He did not have time to analyse the sensation, because the lift was already at the top floor. He stepped out, still covering his mouth with his handkerchief, and made his way to the last room at the end of the hall.

In crossing the threshold he felt a rush of cold air against his face. A careless maid had left the heat turned off and a window open. "A pretty place to dress in!" he reflected angrily. It was a small room comfortably and neatly furnished, but in such a way as to suggest its identity with the hundreds of other rooms in the same hotel. Though Pietro had lived in the place for two years or more, the anonymity of its atmosphere had not been disturbed by the slightest touch of personality or adornment on his part. It was as though he had moved in a few days before and were expecting to leave a few days later. On the clothes-rack hung a hat and a soiled shirt that he could, after all, wear again. A half-dozen books on the table, the toilet articles on the washstand, two travelling-bags piled on their flat sides one on top of the other in a corner—these were the only traces of Pietro's long habitation of the room. But there was less sincerity than artifice in such poverty. Willing to forget his past, dissatisfied with his present, hopeful of his future, Pietro had always viewed his hotel room as a transient abode and studiously avoided embellishing it or making it more comfortable with any of those superfluous gadgets that might suggest permanency or even temporary contentment.

He was so engrossed in his inner thoughts that he was hardly aware of what he was doing as he took off his clothes, washed his face and hands, opened the closet and got out his evening suit, laid it out on the bed, pulled out a drawer in the bureau, and found a wing collar (which he had previously worn with a black tie but which still could pass as clean). Finally he stepped to the mirror and began slowly to dress. Yes, a bit of disgust, and a trace of remorse! Both suddenly revealed by the glimpse, in the lift mirror, of the blotch of red that Andreina's kiss had left on his face! "What was my thought?" he asked himself. "What was my actual thought, when I told Andreina that I was busy and could not get back to her till midnight? Now it wasn't 'I have to be with Sofia.' It was 'I am invited to a party, and do not intend to miss it.' That was my actual thought, and one's actual thought runs along the line that one considers most important."

The discovery cut him to the quick. He had been all along pretending to himself that he had a sincere disinterested affection for the young marchesa, and to the occasional adventures that came his way he had never attached more than a limited significance. But his meeting with Andreina had shaken him. He could now see that his relations with Sofia were a matter of self-seeking and ambition, while a certain atmosphere of fraud hung unpleasantly over all his life. So then—Andreina was really right? The similarity between them lay in the direction, not of their qualities, but of their defects? That was a painful admission for him to make to himself. Not only was it painful. It filled him with boundless bewilderment and terror. He had always firmly believed in his unselfishness, that his was a distinctly ethical outlook, ethical to the point of fastidiousness. That belief had spared him doubts and scruples, enabled him to act with decision and to express his capacities for indignation and criticalness at the expense of others. It had filled him, further, with great esteem for himself and a great condescension towards others, an esteem and a condescension that were both perfectly sincere, for an exalted and passionate admiration for virtue came naturally to him, and equally naturally the profound and almost physical disgust that wickedness inspired. "Others," he sometimes thought, and not without pride, "others struggle to get along on shrewdness, calculation, trickery, and then, when the accounts are all in, they find, Machiavellians that they are, that they have bagged a handful of flies. My game, instead, is sincerity, honesty, unselfishness—my better instincts, in a word. I hate deception, and I hate manœuvring. And how does it turn out? It turns out that I, the ingenuous soul, I, the man who does not know the ways of the world, get along better and better. They try to elbow their way up with duplicity and crookedness, fooling people. Well, they never get anywhere in particular. I never think about getting on. I just try to make friends and create ties of affection. I try to establish good and above-board relations with everybody I meet. And that, in the end, all counts to my advantage. My friends, those ties of affection, those sound relationships, prove to be the efficient instruments of my fortune. Conclusion, the shrewdest policy is not to be shrewd at all!"

Such convictions had never met opposition in his mind and, subsisting there unshaken and unshakable, in a static dogmatic atmosphere, beyond question and above discussion, they had endowed him with a blind and almost reckless freedom of action. But now there had come, first, the accusations of Maria Luisa, then the assertions of Andreina, and finally Andreina's kiss, which had destroyed the superficial coherence in his conduct. So all veilings of illusion had been torn from his eyes! He could suddenly see that he was not what he thought he was. Like everybody else, perhaps more than anybody else, he was tainted, subtly but irreparably tainted, with that selfishness, ambition, calculation, scheming, which was the most frequent target of his righteous indignation. Now he really did want to be different from other people, better than other people. That was why calculation, ambition, selfishness, doubly disgusted him, because they were low in themselves and because they were common. So his discovery filled him with bewilderment and with terror. He was like a person who has been living safely through a pestilence and then, suddenly and quite by chance, discovers on his body the spots and swellings of the loathsome disease to which he has thought himself immune.

By that time he was dressed, except for his vest and tailcoat. But as he was struggling with the knot of his white tie, he gave a deep sigh, as it were for a conclusion to his long meditation, and his eye suddenly became aware of his image in the mirror. There he stood, erect, in black trousers and a stiff-bosomed shirt that swelled out in front between the straps of his suspenders . . . a ridiculous, vulgar figure, full of false and frivolous penitence! A wave of infinite disgust swept over him. He undid the tie with a violent pull and tossed it aside, then threw himself upon his bed, with his legs bent over the side and his head off the pillows. "I am tired of all this lying!" he said to himself over and over again, and his hand sketched a gesture as of brushing aside an annoying insect. All the same he could not repress a twinge of self-satisfaction that he should be capable of such disgust. "It's a sign," he thought, "that I am not as selfish as Andreina thinks. If I really were, I would not be so conscious of being, and if I did realize it, it would not hurt me as much as it does." He lay for some moments amid these alternating waves of self-contempt and self-approval. Then an idea occurred to him, and he embraced it at once as the one course of action that would cure his disgust at the very roots, restore him to his former sense of rectitude, and supply him with an effective rebuttal of Andreina's charges. He would go to Sofia, tell her what he had been thinking about their relations, and ask her to break off the engagement. In that way only would he be able to see clearly in the complications that were entangling him and, having freed his conscience of any suspicion of interest and ambition, go without remorse to his midnight appointment.

The decision freed his mind. He took off the stiff-bosomed shirt and the silk-striped trousers, put on the blue suit he wore every day, and left the room.

XIV

THE Tanzillos lived in a big building that had been a monastery in days long before the growth of a suburban Rome beyond the walls. As a convent it had stood solitary in the midst of its fields and orchards. Now it had been restored and remodelled as a modern residence with a garden, and was just one among many such villas with gardens that had risen in one of the newest quarters of the expanding town. The main entrance was on a sloping boulevard that made the entire circuit of the walls of the Zoological Garden. Looking down from the avenue one could see peering over the wall the tops of the great iron cages that held eagles, vultures, and other birds of prey, or the bluish crests of the hills and dales of cement, among which, at counterfeit liberty, wolves, lions, tigers, and bears wandered. When the wind was right, the acrid odour of the dens floated up to the villa, and at all times, but especially at the feeding hours, one could hear the roaring of the hungry animals—sounds strange indeed in that quiet, well-groomed residential district.

A stately gateway in black and gilded metal gave access to the garden. As one looked through it one glimpsed a number of tall trees rising from a green, carefully tended lawn, and broad gravelled walks that gave one the impression of stretching away into a great park, or into a silent forest, where, at the most, one could hear the crackling of a dry twig under one's footstep or the twitter of some bird. But that was just an illusion created by the architect's design, on the assumption of a fleeting glance through the gate by a passerby. There were no trees except those that could be seen, and there was just that patch of lawn. One of the walks circled the patch to the left, the other to the right, and they met in a little gravelled square in front of the building.

The latter was a long, irregular affair shaped like the hull of a vessel. The old convent had not lent itself very readily to modernization. In spite of the crowds of statues that stood with uplifted arms on the eaves, or pondered thoughtfully in niches, in spite of all the balls, stars, half-columns, capitals, escutcheons, cornices, and other baroque adornments with which the restorer had tried to mask the primitive conventual façade, it still retained its original air of naked severity, and all those ornaments, thrust without visible provocation upon the ancient walls, looked like so many superfluities that left one with an impression of hybrid disharmony. The resistance of the old convent to the architect's intentions was even more evident in the interior disposition of the structure. There the modern planner had been able to do very little, except abolish a partition or cut a window, here or there. The low ceilings of the monastery still held their own and so did the dozens and dozens of tiny cell-like rooms, with a complicated system of passageways, stairways, anterooms, corridors. From such a wealth of space there had been no way to produce a drawing-room of respectable size.

The idea of purchasing the convent had been Maria Luisa's, and she had supervised the decorating, furnishing the many rooms in a uniform, depressing, counterfeit antique style. One met fifteenth-century refectory tables, chests, highboys, beds, at every turn, and at every turn wrought-iron implements, weapons, firearms. Some blunderbuss or other stood in every corner, and black panoplies figured on one wall in four. She had covered the partitions with a dark-red material that was loosely tacked on and failed to keep out draughts. The areas that were by chance left free of a harquebus or a halberd from Maria Luisa's arsenal were filled in with large blackened paintings of no worth, scattered about at random and almost always crookedly hung.

The reception-rooms and the dining-room were on the ground floor. The dining-room, irregular in shape, was in two sections, of widely different sizes and at different levels. Between was a flight of two steps in a sort of arch. The larger section was also the barest, containing a sideboard, on which the servants rested the dishes while serving meals, and three or four chairs grouped around a large fireplace in brick and stone. The other was more like an alcove with a very low ceiling. It contained the table, around which, at mealtimes, the servants moved with their dishes and their napkins like priests about an altar. The arch, which, among other motifs, showed the escutcheon of the Tanzillos in frequent recurrence, was not only an arch. It was fenced off with one of those wooden gates that are sometimes seen in choirs in churches. In doubtful taste as a whole, the gate had little gilded columns for uprights, each of them decorated with the shield of the Tanzillos with its blue background.

As Pietro entered that evening, the dining-room was dark, except for the alcove, where, in the prevailing style, a wealth of glasses and decanters blazed in the light of twisted purple candles. The wooden gate was open wide. At the table, far apart, their faces lighted by the flicker of the candles, sat Matteo and Sofia. Matteo was smoking. He sat facing the gate, his eyes lowered upon the table. He was thoughtful, grave. He did not look up at the sound of Pietro's footsteps, nor did he rise. Sofia, on the other hand, seemed pleased. She raised an arm and waved gaily at him, with an "At last!" that was half impatient, half cheery.

The answer to her greeting came not from Pietro but from the dark area under the table, where an ugly lapdog, a cross between a fox terrier and a dachshund, gave a growl, and slowly emerged to bark furiously at the new-comer.

"Hush, Chéri, it's Pietro—don't you see? Hush!"

And bending sidewise from her chair Sofia reached for the dog, trying to catch him. But Chéri edged away to a safe distance and continued his barking and snarling.

Sofia's affectionate welcome, which was so much at odds with all that had been happening and with the decisions he had reached, deepened Pietro's sense of the precariousness of their relationship. Self-conscious, embarrassed, he ascended the two steps and sat down at the table in his turn.

"But you are not in evening clothes!" cried Sofia, in a tone of dismay. "Yet I told you about the party this evening!"

The trembling candlelight seemed to play with deliberate care all about the oval of her face, as she leaned forward over the table. It was as though she were a portrait in a dark church, and some visitor were manipulating the candle with diligent attention in order to bring out every detail of the displeasure that was imprinted on her features.

"I can't go," answered Pietro, and he was conscious of feeling a grim satisfaction. "I have work to do—at the office."

He noted a twitch of anger in the hand she brought down on the table, and an angry tremor in the curls of her hair and, under the curls, in the long tear-shaped earrings of false pearls.

"Perfect!" she cried. "You are not going either! That makes two!"

"Two?"

"Yes, Matteo is backing out." And she looked at her brother diffidently. "You have your work at the newspaper, and that's an excuse. But he hasn't. If he's staying away, it's just to spite Maria Luisa. So"—and she sighed disgustedly—"back and forth, tit for tat, we shall have that for the rest of our lives!"

Matteo did not issue from his absorption, nor did he raise his eyes. Pietro was preoccupied with his own worries and paid the barest attention to his fiancée's little outburst. He did manage to answer:

"Spite? Something has happened? What?"

"What has happened is that Maria Luisa called and said that she would go to the party with us, but then leave and go home again. Ridiculous, agreed! She oughtn't to behave like that. But all the same, it's a step in the right direction, don't you think? The party, this evening! Then tomorrow, something else perhaps! And so, in the end, reconciliation! But now Matteo gets the brilliant idea—to punish her, he says—of not going to the party at all! He may be right, he may be wrong. In any case, I say again, if we are to go on that way, where do we get?"

"But where is Maria Luisa?" asked Pietro, who had failed to grasp the intricate reasoning. "She is here already?"

"No, but she is coming."

There was a moment's silence. Pietro sat staring at the table in front of him. Finally he looked up, and there was a gleam of resolution in the gaze with which he met his fiancée's swimming eyes.

"I had a purpose in coming," he said, looking at her fixedly. "I want to have a talk with you, Sofia."

"With me?" she asked, astonished, her eyes opening wide in her now darkened face.

"Yes, with you."

"Alone?"

Curiosity and diversion overcame the flash of alarm that had crossed her features.

"With you alone."

Sofia sat for a moment stupefied, her wide-opened eyes staring into space. Then her ugly features wrinkled into an expression of intense and gay curiosity.

"Something important? Very important?"

"Very important!"

She turned and looked at Pietro, as though trying to read the secret from his expression.

"It's something about Matteo!" she guessed, finally.

Pietro's mind was clear in spite of his anger and his other worries. He could not help realizing the seriousness of the step he was about to take so lightly, and on a momentary impulse to attain inner coherence. To break off his engagement and, worse still, begin an affair with Andreina, not only meant undoing all that he had accomplished during years of patient effort. It also meant plunging into a dubious, compromising involvement from which there might be no issue. "So," he thought, as he looked into the gay eyes of his fiancée, which were sparkling with curiosity, "so, casually, as though it were nothing, I decide about my whole future!"

But he shook off the thought, and replied dryly, impatiently:

"It has nothing to do with Matteo. It is about you. Don't sit there asking me questions! I can talk only with you alone."

Unable to control her excited curiosity a moment longer, Sofia pushed back her chair impetuously and leapt to her feet.

"Come," she cried, taking Pietro by a sleeve. "Let's go into the other room. What fun this is! I am dying to hear what it's all about! I just can't wait!"

Her girlish eagerness cut Pietro's conscience to the quick. He steeled himself, however, and was about to let himself be dragged away, when the door of the dining-room opened and Maria Luisa appeared.

She was dressed in an evening gown, so long and so closely fitted that, at each one of her short, rapid, jerky steps, she seemed to be struggling inside a sheath of tight bandages. Lean as she was, the cut of her clothes gave her a suggestion of stoutness. Little cushions of dark ripe flesh bulged from between the strips of cloth under her armpits and down her back, and her broad plump arms, contrasting strongly with the repressed bandaged appearance of her legs and thighs, created a false impression that, set at liberty, her body would be much more ample and loose-jointed than it really was.

To set off the flat, almost dusty black of her gown, Maria Luisa wore on her throat, wrists, and fingers a display of large, unusually brilliant diamonds, without any other stone. These details of attire, along with her stately, easy carriage, showed that she had dressed with the greatest premeditation, was resolved to make an impression, and was sure of doing so, confident that she would outshine at the party even women who were far younger and prettier than she.

But that was a mistaken confidence on her part. Had she been able to see herself with less prejudiced eyes, she would probably have hurried home and changed her plan of campaign. She was like a tall precious vase carrying a bouquet of cheap half-withered flowers. The pretentious fit of her gown and the splendour of her jewels served, not so much to beautify her, as to call attention to everything about her that was declining, frightened, uncertain. Her hair, which she had patiently doctored to a shade between chestnut and blond, had never seemed so false and so repulsive. Her wrinkled throat seemed more faded and senile than ever under the blaze of gems. The stare in her eyes, the drooping corners of her mouth, spelled out, as in print, worry, dismay, panic.

She seemed to be conscious of the humiliating absurdity of this conditional and half-diplomatic reconciliation with her husband, and perhaps in order to forget it herself and induce others to forget it, she came forward into the room with an easy, offhand, half-jocular manner, as though she were just coming down from her old room on the floor above and had not driven across the whole town from her villa. Chéri, under the table, welcomed her as he had welcomed Pietro, rushing at her fiercely and barking to split the air.

"Shh . . . Chéri, hush!" warned Maria Luisa, laughing as best she could, waving an annoyed gesture at the dog and holding up the train of her skirt with her free hand. "I am getting worried," she then said, addressing Sofia. "What can have happened to me during these three weeks? Your dog does not know me, and if he weren't such a cowardly little cur he would actually bite me. When Giuseppe saw who I was, he wouldn't let me in, and it was quite a task to get him to understand that I hadn't the least intention of waiting out there in the garden to freeze. And you people! What are you staring at me for? Don't you recognize me?"

There was an unmusical, nervous, tense quality about her voice as it rang in the silent room. It was evident that she did not know what to say or do, and that, aside from the inadequate satisfaction she took in her gown and her diamonds, she had no feeling or thought that was not bewildered and contradictory.

The first to recover from the surprise of her entrance was Sofia, who hurried down the steps, with the dog at her heels, holding out her hands in welcome.

"So glad you have come!" she lied cheerily, gaily. "We were waiting for you. In fact we were just going to call to see whether you had started."

"There would have been no sense in your doing that," Maria Luisa replied in a hard, rather loud tone, pretending to be busied with her gown, but really with her eyes all on her husband. Matteo had not risen or given any other evidence of being aware of her presence. "I am a woman of my word. I told Matteo I would come, and I have come."

Matteo's demeanour was beginning to irritate his sister. "He shoulders everything off on me," Sofia complained to herself. "Why doesn't he do something?" However, concealing her anger under a smiling, amiable face, she answered after a second, pretending embarrassment:

"It's quite an event, you know, to have you back with us again at last. The house isn't the same without you. I only wish"—and she sighed, with a rapid glance of appeal in her brother's direction—"I only wish you were really back, and not just for a visit. . . . Anyway, in hopes of better, perhaps all I can do is be happy at this much."

"Rosa too feels that way about it," answered Maria Luisa, cold, casual, pressing her neatly dressed hair with her bejewelled fingers. " 'When are we going home?' she asks me every day. To tell the truth, she would be the only one to gain anything by a reconciliation between Matteo and me. Over at my place she has to work. Here she can sit all day long with her hands folded."

Sofia pretended not to notice the unpleasant allusiveness in the remark. Drawing back and surveying her sister-in-law, she cried rapturously:

"Darling, what a beautiful gown! I never saw you in it before. It becomes you marvellously!"

"It's a left-over from last year," the other answered dryly, still trying to be unpleasant. "I'm sorry I can't go into ecstasies over yours," she added as an afterthought. "I don't like it—I really don't."

That thrust was harder for Sofia to accept than the other had been. "She thinks she's a wonder in that outfit," she thought. "It's so tight she looks like a roll of salame." However, she controlled her tongue again and answered, looking down along her own dress:

"You think it's not becoming?"

"Think?" replied Maria Luisa, stiff, conclusive. "Why, darling, there can be no two opinions about it." But she now looked without evasion at her husband. "Why, Matteo isn't dressed! Isn't he coming with us?"

"Yes," said Sofia, pretending surprise, and also turning towards her brother. "He's coming, he's coming!"

"Well, if we're going," said Maria Luisa, abrupt, nervous, "let's be starting and have done with it." And with a pirouette that was intended to cause a whir of lace about her invisible feet, but which she succeeded in executing only half-way because of the tightness of her gown, she turned towards the two steps and advanced at a cramped rapid gait in Matteo's direction.

"Go and get dressed, Matteo, if you intend to go," she ordered, uncertain, imperious, avoiding a direct gaze either at her husband or at Pietro. "I shall wait ten minutes and not a second more. If you are not ready in ten minutes, I shall leave. With you, without you, it's all the same to me!"

Matteo was reluctant to go to the party in the same nervous irrational way that his wife was bent on going. "All she's thinking of is the party," he thought, surveying her up and down contemptuously. "There she is! We have a quarrel. She leaves me for three weeks and even talks of an annulment. Another woman in her place would try to be pleasant and smooth things over. She? Not she! She has her mind on a party, and is worried about only one thing—that she may not be seen at it." So thought Matteo, and it was therefore with a grim pleasure that he looked up towards the woman and courteously, simply, replied:

"If you are only waiting for me, please don't! I have changed my mind. I am not going."

Though she had never expected anything extraordinary or nourished any great illusions about this tentative return to her home, Maria Luisa had succumbed to the suggestiveness that lingers about all important steps and foreseen it as something far more cordial, stirring, and solemn. Now she was conscious of the same cruel disenchantment that Matteo had felt on her entrance. Forgetting that the real reason for her return was her snobbish desire to appear at an important social event, she took her husband's stolid hostility as an unkind blow at the faithful and affectionate wife she at that moment thought she really was. For a time she stood motionless, erect, silent, pressing her legs against the arm of the chair in which her husband was sitting, and looking down with a wild stare at his tilted bald head.

"My poor Matteo," she finally managed to say, forcing an expression of withering pity, "tell the truth! You think you are inflicting the greatest torture on me by not coming tonight. That's your idea, isn't it?"

Matteo could have found nothing more irksome than to be sitting there in an armchair that was too low for the length of his legs while his wife stood erect at his side pouring upon his head the impure flood of her bitter compassion. But he was concerned above all else to avoid a scene, and tried to answer with the urbane moderation of an expert and patient better-half.

"It is not spite, I assure you," he answered quietly. "The truth is, I'm tired, and I thought you didn't need me in order to go to the reception. Sofia is to be there anyhow." He drew his watch from his vest pocket, snapped the lid open, and added: "I should advise you to be starting. Otherwise you will be really late."

Fearful of an explosion, Sofia interfered in her turn.

"Yes, let's be going," she said eagerly. "We are late. Good night, Matteo!"

And grasping an arm of the reluctant Maria Luisa she tried to start her towards the door, Pietro leading the way.

"It's not as late as all that," objected Maria Luisa, anxious to match his coldness with a contempt and a cruelty just as icy. "It's only quarter past ten. It is a pity that he should keep that woman waiting, but do we always have to give in on that account?"

So with a thrust and a slash, a rustling of silk and a scornful snicker, Maria Luisa followed her sister-in-law through the door, which Pietro closed behind them.

But in Sofia curiosity was far stronger than any worldly ambition, and she would have given that party and a dozen like it to know what her fiancé had to say to her. She halted suddenly and looked at Maria Luisa, questioningly. Could they spare another ten minutes, that she might have a private talk with Pietro? Suspicious, disposed to be rude, Maria Luisa did not like the suggestion, sensing in it another piece of inconsiderateness on the part of the Tanzillos. Her first impulse was to refuse vehemently, but it occurred to her that the evening was still young, and that if she was to make a real sensation of her return to society, it would be better that all the other guests should be there when she arrived. She sacrificed the opportunity to make a new scene, therefore, and answered, ill-humouredly, that she would go to her own room in the house and primp up a bit.

"Where can we talk most at our ease?" asked Sofia happily, looking at her fiancé. "I'll tell you—the library!"

Again conscience-stricken, Pietro could only smile embarrassedly, remarking that he did not see why the library would be more convenient than any other room, though, for that matter, it would serve as well as any.

Maria Luisa ascended the flight of narrow stairs ahead of them, making of each of the wooden steps a separate enterprise that called into evident play the whole structure of corseting and bandaging that adjusted her stiflingly tight gown to her bust and thighs. Her difficulties caught Sofia's attention, and she commented with a nudge of her elbow into Pietro's ribs, stifling a giggle.

They reached the hallway on the floor above, a spacious gloomy room with a low ceiling and white walls, decorated with chests, halberds, and dark, faded paintings. With her thoughts still on the party, Maria Luisa stopped and looked at her sister-in-law with her staring eyes.

"Do you know who is going to be most surprised to see me?" she asked.

"No. Who do you think?"

"Marietta."

"Why Marietta?"

The woman's eyes glittered with malice and decision.

"For the simple reason—and no one can tell me it isn't so—that Marietta is the person who has been saying all about town that I had eloped with somebody."

Sofia was not the girl to be shocked by a suspicion of that sort. She answered, in all gravity, that there might be something in it, but that at any rate they could be on the lookout and make sure. Whereupon Maria Luisa disappeared into a side corridor that led to her room, while Sofia preceded her fiancé to a door at the end of the long hallway.

She opened it. The room beyond was entirely dark and a musty odour struck the nostrils. It was as though the library had been sleeping in that blackness for countless years. They entered and closed the door. Sofia turned on a light.

XV

THE library was a square little hole, altogether unworthy of its august denomination. The one window was hung with green curtains, and green was the papering on the walls. To the right and left of the window stood two large bookcases stuffed with unbound books, most of them French novels with broken yellow backs. There was a collection of official reports bound in cloth. Several tiers of narrow unbound volumes, piled one upon the other on their sides, seemed to represent a subscription of several years to some fashionable magazine. There were no books on the longer wall. That was almost covered by a great chart that exhibited the family tree of the Tanzillos. Under the chart stood two leather-covered chairs, and a sofa also in leather.

Sofia led her fiancé straight to the sofa, and sat down upon it, with all the attitudes of a happy child adjusting itself in hungry expectation of the story its mother has promised to tell.

She was the first to speak, coddling her curiosity with premeditated gourmandise.

"Now there is no escape left for you. Willingly or by force you simply have to tell me. But give me one more guess—it's about our wedding?"

His conscience hurt still more by her greediness, Pietro thought a moment.

"Yes, in a way it is. Yes."

"Then another guess," cried Sofia, proud of her perspicacity. "It's about where we are going to live when we are married?"

Pietro looked at her. Her trustfulness filled him with a remorseful compassion, and at the same time suggested a new doubt. Was it really true that there was nothing but calculation in their relationship? Was it wise, was it fair, just on an impulse, to undo an engagement in which affection may have been playing a far larger part than even he had supposed?

"No," he said, shaking his head, and making an effort. "No, it's something quite different, and you are not going to like it. Here is the point. I have been thinking things over, and I have come to the conclusion that it will be better for both of us if we never marry. I think we had better separate by common accord before it is too late."

A long silence followed. Sofia seemed less shocked and pained than filled with an incredulous, almost motherly apprehension, as though what she heard were so fantastic as to cause fears lest her fiancé had suddenly gone out of his mind. Sitting sidewise on the sofa she looked at Pietro with worried eyes. Her bright, painted face under the mass of dangling black curls expressed an anguished wonder. She kept biting at her upper lip, which was full, prominent, shaded with a faint mist of down. She bit at it, not as in an effort to keep from weeping, but as a mechanical expression of cruel perplexity. Finally she laid a hand on his shoulder.

"But, Bébé," she began, and Pietro shivered, knowing that the use of that diminutive was a sign of great tenderness with her, "whatever are you dreaming of? How could you think of such a thing? And why just now, of all times? What is the matter with you?"

"There's nothing the matter," he replied, sheepishly, lowering his eyes. "Don't imagine it's something I have just thought of. I have felt that way for a long time. If I did not speak sooner, it was because I wanted to make sure, so as not to be sorry afterwards. The fact is, I have come to feel that I do not love you enough, or, at least, as much as I ought, that I would be marrying you out of considerations of interest, not for love."

He raised his head and looked at her. The expression of motherly concern had not vanished from her bright, immobile face. It seemed to have deepened rather.

"But, Bébé—interest! What do you mean by interest?"

There was a tender, anguished tone to her voice.

He lowered his head again. However absurd the ways in which Sofia manifested her affection for him, it was a sincere affection and it stirred him. He was afraid that if he looked at her again, he would imagine himself in love and so abandon his decision to break with her.

"What do I mean by interest?" he repeated, with an effort, and not without a certain angry vehemence. "I mean all sorts of things, among them vanity, snobbery, just for one. You never thought I might be a climber?" His voice had risen to a shrill note. "Did it never occur to you that I might have proposed to you because you had a title? Well, think a moment, and you'll see that such a thing is by no means improbable. Then, by interest I mean all those calculations that relate to money. How do you know that in proposing I did not have my eye on a dowry?"

At last he had attained complete sincerity, and was already conscious of a definite sense of relief. It was as though he had freed himself of an outworn or diseased portion of his being. But as he again looked up at Sofia, he perceived that his words had had no other effect than to intensify her expression of incredulous and wondering apprehension.

"But, Bébé," she cried, joining her two hands, "think a moment, instead of going on that way. If you were a climber, if you were a fortune-hunter, a snob, or anything else you choose to call it, do you think you would come and say so to me? You wouldn't, I can assure you—in fact you wouldn't even be conscious of being one of those things. You can believe me, on that point—I live in a world of snobs and climbers. Do you want to know who is a snob—your real climber? Maria Luisa! She? She would sell her soul for a title, or even for a fortune, for in spite of all she has, there is no end to her greed. But go and tell her that she is like that, and she will call you a liar."

The attack on Maria Luisa had come to her instinctively, by way of a natural, almost physical antipathy. Then her eyes opened wider and wider, and she threw a hand to her forehead with a resonant slap.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "I see! I see! I see where all this nonsense comes from! Of course, idiot that I was! What a fool not to have thought of it, the first thing!" She pointed a finger at him. "Tell me the truth! You have been seeing Maria Luisa lately!"

"Yes," admitted Pietro, more shocked by his remembrance of what had gone on that afternoon at the woman's house than embarrassed by Sofia's question. "Why do you ask?"

"Why do I ask!" continued Sofia, her aggressiveness mounting. "And she told you that you were a climber, that you were marrying a title and a fortune, and all such rubbish? Oh, I know the kind of thing she says! She told you what she told me this afternoon, when I called on her. But Maria Luisa had better watch out!" Sofia raised a clenched fist, and her face was flaming. "As long as she keeps to Matteo, she can intrigue and gossip all she wants. But let her try to interfere between you and me and she will be sorry! She is biting off more than she can swallow, I'll tell you that—the mean, snobby, stingy, poisonous thing!"

The denunciation had been delivered with the same half-physical naturalness, but the girl's breast rose and fell in a rapid bellicose pant under the too numerous frills of her too ornate gown, and she kept opening and clenching her fists excitedly, her eyes looking at the door, as though she were expecting that at any moment her sister-in-law might come through it and receive the thrashing she deserved. Her attitude disconcerted Pietro. He had hoped that he could easily convince her of the necessity of their separating. Now he could foresee that, whatever he might say, she would not believe him and always lay the fault at Maria Luisa's door.

He decided, however, to make another effort. Speaking slowly, and gazing dreamily into the air in front of him, he said:

"You are wrong in blaming Maria Luisa. At the most she merely said things that I had long been thinking myself. That is the actual truth. You do not know me very well, Sofia. I am responsible for that. I have always misrepresented my character to you. I may create the impression of being many opposite things. Really, at bottom, I am little else than selfishness and vanity. Every time I meet someone new, the first thing I ask myself is not whether he is an attractive or unattractive person, but whether and to what extent I can find him useful." He stopped and thought a moment, as he struggled painfully to disentangle the intricate elements in his character. "Even when I say simply that I like or do not like a person, the judgment always contains a hidden motive of selfish interest that concerns me alone and that only I could truly appraise. And all that comes as naturally and unavoidably to me as swimming comes to a fish, or flying to a bird."

These comparisons, delivered slowly, bitterly, seemed to have no great effect on Sofia. Instead of trying to understand, she seemed to be following her fiancé's argument with the alarmed pity with which she would have listened to the ravings of a lunatic. She joined her two hands again, in supplication.

"Don't, Bébé, don't!" she entreated. "You frighten me when you begin to analyse, investigate, torment, destroy yourself. It's all imagination, I assure you. Just reflect! If you really were all you say you are, if you really were marrying me for the reasons you say, can you imagine you would speak of yourself as you have been speaking here?"

"She's right there," thought Pietro, half pleased with his virtue, but irritated at his scant progress. Now that the rupture he had planned had become enmired in an exchange of subtleties, the vigorous contempt for himself that had first inspired him to talk to Sofia was weakening, and a thousand doubts were reviving in his mind again. Was he an angel or a devil? Who was right, Sofia or Andreina? At thought of the latter a wave of desire swept over him and he became suddenly conscious of the scant sensuous appeal that his fiancée had for him. "I am in love with Andreina and not with Sofia," he suddenly concluded. "That ought to settle the question!"

However, the problem was to prove to the incredulous Sofia that he was not in love with her. And how go about that? Hesitating a moment, he finally decided to tell his fiancée about what had occurred that afternoon at Maria Luisa's.

"Very well," he began, "never mind about what I can imagine, as regards my selfishness. Suppose you are right. Let us get down to facts. If I tell you something that will prove the little affection I have for you, will you believe me?"

Sofia looked at him, biting at her lip and shaking her head. Finally she lifted her two hands, palms downwards, and moved them up and down in a gesture of mingled deprecation and perplexity.

"Bébé, you are not yourself!" she protested. "You are not yourself, and you almost frighten me. How can you expect me to believe you, or not believe you? But I can tell you one thing. I shall get even with Maria Luisa for this!"

Pietro caught the opportunity on the wing.

"Maria Luisa, you say! Well, what would you think of me and of my love if I were to tell you that I have made love to your sister-in-law?"

"You?" cried Sofia, stunned. "You—Maria Luisa?"

"No more, no less!" sighed Pietro, lowering his eyes. "I am ashamed to say so, but among the things that I have done, there is that too. You may not know it, but this afternoon, before you went to see her, Maria Luisa was with me. To tell the truth, I had gone there intending no harm—just because she had asked me to. But there she was, frightened at her situation after leaving you here, desperately lonely, eager to find some way or other to even the score with Matteo. And I thought—it seems that such thinking as I do serves only to suggest the most infamous conduct to me—I thought: given the situation in which Maria Luisa finds herself, it ought not to be hard to make her my mistress. And I was not mistaken." At this point, Pietro looked up and gazed at

Sofia attentively. "In fact, I may even say that I was myself astonished at the speed with which she grasped at the opportunity. To begin with, and almost at once, we kissed. . . ."

"You didn't!" cried Sofia, opening her eyes wide, and covering her mouth with her hand in a gesture of doubt and wonder. "You didn't!"

"I tell you we did!" Pietro was a little disappointed that his caddish revelation had caused more astonishment than anger in the girl. "Yes, we kissed once, twice, as many as three times. Then she pretended she was afraid of rumpling her dress. She got up, said she was going to change, and disappeared into her bedroom."

"And you?" asked Sofia, biting at her nails in excited anticipation, and dying of curiosity.

"I? Well, after going that far, I had, I am obliged to confess, a flash of common sense. I realized that I was doing a despicable thing and decided suddenly to draw back. But I knew she was undressing, so I rushed into her bedroom and by fair means and foul managed to bring her to my way of thinking. Now, naturally, she hates me like poison and is doing everything she can to harm me. Tell me now," he concluded with a sigh, "am I not right in preferring that we break our engagement, instead of trying to go on on such a false basis?"

They looked at each other. Sofia seemed quite unable to fill her eyes with him. It was as though she were seeing him for the first time. The sentiment that gleamed in her interested eyes would have been hard to define. It may have been wonder, or perhaps incredulity, or perhaps amusement. It certainly was not anger. It certainly was not disgust.

"What I don't understand," she finally and most unexpectedly exclaimed, "is how you ever did it!"

"What?" asked Pietro.

"How you could stand kissing that woman?"

Checkmated, not a little nettled, Pietro could not think of an answer.

"I liked her," he finally said.

"You didn't, Bébé! Such a thing is not possible." And she giggled, half in amusement, half in deprecation. "You couldn't have wanted her."

Angry now, Pietro made no reply. Sofia stood and looked at him in silence, her face gradually sketching the smile that a reproving mother might have on detecting a child in a roguish prank. Then, breaking free, she cried:

"Oh, this is all so amusing! Who would ever have dreamed it of Maria Luisa, that prune of a saint! As for you, darling, I do admire your strong stomach. If I were a man I could not bring myself to touch that woman even with gloves on! The mere idea of such a thing makes me shiver." But her curiosity suddenly laid hold on her again. "Tell me—you went to her bedroom. How was she? Nothing on?"

"No," answered Pietro, reluctantly. "She had her chemise on."

"Her chemise on!" cried Sofia gleefully, opening her throat wide to an uproarious laugh. "And it was daytime! More likely a brassière! I get the picture. And what fun, what fun! Maria Luisa in her chemise! I can almost see her. But tell me the truth! When you saw her the way God made her—you got over it, didn't you! The truth, now! That was why you made the great refusal."

Pietro understood that, involuntarily, in a way of her own, Sofia was questioning his good faith quite as positively as Maria Luisa and Andreina had done. "It serves me right!" he exclaimed mentally, boiling. With an effort, and striving to avoid any suggestion of anger as well as of boastfulness, he replied slowly:

"No, I made the great refusal, as you call it, out of consideration for you, for Matteo, and for her. That is the purest truth. If you won't believe it, so much the worse! So then, perhaps that is enough, unless you insist on something else."

"Now don't be cross, Bébé!" she begged, apprehensive of his mood. "Don't be cross! Tell me one more thing, and I promise you it will be the last. How did she act when you told her you would have nothing to do with her? She acted hurt?"

"Very much hurt!" answered Pietro. "But, Sofia," he resumed after a moment, "I told you all that, not in order to ridicule Maria Luisa—she is in no way to blame—but to show you that my affection for you must be pretty flimsy if a temptation of that sort can make me forget it."

He saw her shake her head in steadfast conviction.

"No, Bébé, don't you worry about having done anything wrong." And then, gathering vehemence: "I love you because you are like that. You wouldn't be you if you were not for ever tormenting yourself, tearing yourself to bits with that destructive, analysing mind of yours. What you did is nothing wrong. One might call it weak. Better call it a boyish prank and forget about it! Really, now, it was just nothing!"

Routed, unable to think of a way out for himself, Pietro sat and looked at her, ironically. "I'll bet I could tell her of my appointment with Andreina tonight, and still she would be sweet about it!" He had never felt such complete disgust for the false situation into which he had worked himself, and from which he could think of no issue.

"So," he finally answered, "you are convinced that I love you?"

She raised her two hands in impatient menace.

"Will you ever stop! Always analysing! Always picking to pieces! Live and let live—that's what I say. Perhaps you love me, perhaps you don't! I don't know and I don't care. What I know is that we are engaged, that we have no reason not to be, and that we are going to be married. What more do you want than that?"

Pietro could hardly contain his impotent rage.

"Yes, yes," he echoed witheringly. "What more do I want than that!" Plenty! he thought, and might have answered, had not the door suddenly opened to reveal, between its two white enamelled wings, the dark, much-painted face of Maria Luisa.

"I am going to the ball!" she warned, in her gayer, more self-important tone. "How about you? You are still talking? But make up your mind, my dear! It is getting late."

"Yes, I'm coming," Sofia answered, the irritation in her tone reflecting the resentment that Pietro's treacherous confidences had aroused in her.

The intonation did not escape Maria Luisa. In fact it fell as an exceedingly disagreeable surprise upon the unarmed enthusiasm for her return to society, which she had been working up in her room. Against the background of white enamel her rouged face darkened, an expression of angry misery replaced its carefree gaiety, its eyes hardened and acquired a cruel look.

"Well—go to the devil!" she returned. She drew back and the door slammed violently.

A deep silence followed. Finally Sofia sighed.

"Oh, how tiresome!"

The violent fling of her sister-in-law had wearied rather than frightened her. She drew her vanity-case from her bag and began to powder her nose. Nervous, unhappy, Pietro paced up and down in front of the twin bookcases, now peering automatically at a title, now glancing furtively at his fiancée.

"So," he suddenly exclaimed, turning towards her, "nothing has happened?"

Sofia was startled.

Drawing her lipstick back from her lips she asked, astonished:

"What was to have happened?"

"Maria Luisa has not made up with Matteo, and we are still engaged."

"Maria Luisa will be back here with us within a week," Sofia replied confidently. "As for us two," she added, looking at him apprehensively, "we have had our talk, and you are not going to begin again, I imagine."

"Yes," pressed Pietro, scowling, obstinate. "But you must admit that I did everything possible to break it, didn't I?"

"I suppose you did," she sighed, and she rose to her feet.

"And the responsibility for not breaking our engagement does not rest with me. It is you who insist that we remain engaged."

"So that's what she has been up to!" thought Sofia, as she considered the taut, unhappy face of her fiancé. On the whole, all that torment, all those fears and scruples, on the young man's part, had rather pleased her, as conforming with the high opinion she had of him—a man too intelligent and too sensitive, a man different from other men and their superior, a man who did not fit into the normal mould and whom only she could understand. "I wish everybody were selfish the way he is," she thought, looking at him steadily. She felt that after the talk they had had she loved him twice as much as ever before. She stepped to his side and touched her fingers to his lowered unhappy face.

"Look, Bébé," she admonished, "stop worrying! Stop torturing yourself! You are tired tonight. You need some rest. Tomorrow everything will seem different, and you will realize how right I am."

Her two eyes, large, black, unexpressive as the eyes of a faithful dog, brimmed with affection. She turned and gave a rapid glance at the door that had slammed half open again, then she took his head in her hands with an infinite and embarrassing veneration, as though it were a precious gem, slowly brought her own face nearer and nearer and then darted a rapid kiss upon his thick, sensuous lips. That was the third or perhaps the fourth kiss that Pietro had received from his fiancée, yet in the hateful embarrassment in which he was floundering he could not help remarking how tremblingly deferential, how chaste, how unstirring, it was.

"What am I to this girl?" he reflected bitterly, as the cold unspeaking lips of his fiancée drew back from his. "Everything I ought to be and would like to be, and never shall be!" But there was Sofia taking his hand, and bending low to kiss it! That was a thrust at his conscience indeed!

"Oh, but we must hurry!" cried Sofia, straightening up with a sort of pant, and dragging him towards the door. "Otherwise I don't know what Maria Luisa will not do to me."

They stepped out into the hall. Maria Luisa was not there, nor did they find her on the floor below, nor in the vestibule. The butler told them that she was waiting in the car in the gravelled square outside.

"Quick!" she cried again, still dragging him after her, slipping in her high heels on the tiles of polished marble, whirling inside the ample folds of her loose, flowing gown.

Now they were out of doors. The night was dark and perfectly still. As though a dense impenetrable air were stifling their rays, the street lamps glimmered, small, unreal, suffocated, between the leafless branches of the trees, with, as it were, a halo of darkness around each of them. The two hurried along the side path between the rows of clipped box. The crunching of the gravel under their steps was as subdued and foreshortened as the beams from the street lights. They reached the gravelled square—a darkish lake over which the black façade of the villa loomed. There, too, the lamps were ineffective. There stood the huge tapering frame of Maria Luisa's car on its big wheels, the head and tail lights casting half-circles of radiance that emphasized the shape of the machine as an animal with folded paws and a phosphorescent belly.

"Good night! Good night!" called Sofia, with a wave of her hand, as she turned from the end of the path into the gravelled square. Her voice had no echo in the dense air. The gay farewell impressed Pietro as singularly lugubrious and distant, as though it were for ever. From the edge of the square he watched her darkening figure reach the car and hastily climb into it. The door closed with a sharp distinct bang, like a pistol shot. The machine started. As it turned, the headlights swept, first the sleeping façade of the villa, then the grove of trees in the garden. With a metallic crunching of gravel, it disappeared into the dark.

He had no difficulty, himself, in finding a taxicab. One was standing not far from the villa entrance at the turn into the Zoological Garden. Sheltered behind the black, dripping, shining mass of the fountain, the driver perceived him at a distance and called: "I'm coming, I'm coming!" Wrapped in a heavy overcoat, he held the door open for Pietro to enter, closed it, and started off. In a flash Pietro found himself on the drive again. He stopped the cab some distance away from Andreina's, in order to complete the trip on foot.

The avenue seemed more lonely than usual. The street lights were sprinkled at rare and distant intervals along the sidewalks and, within the areas that they illumined, the house fronts rose black and forbidding, with their rows of dark windows, through a damp glistening mist that more than anything else revealed the hidden proximity of the river. Pietro strolled unhurriedly along, listening to the clack of his heels on the stone flags. Approaching Andreina's house he noted, with a twinge of incipient uneasiness, that the windows on the ground floor were dark. However, he made straight for the garden gate and lifted the latch. It did not yield to his pressure. It was locked.

"So then?" he asked himself, calmly observing through the festoons of ivy at the end of the path the two lamps that marked the entrance, with the flower-box porch, the main door, now closed, and the three marble steps. "So then?"

He had not foreseen such difficulties, but they did not distress him. Resolute in his anticipation and with his head clear, he felt only too capable of climbing over the gate and reaching the garden. There he would knock on every last window till the outside door opened! What did it matter if he aroused everybody in the place?

He was debating the best means of executing that design when, suddenly, above his head, he heard a very slight sound as faint as a whisper, or the rustle of a gown. He looked up. But almost at that instant something dropped, and he heard a metallic clink on the pavement at his feet. He stooped and picked up the object. It was a ring with three keys.

Where had they come from? Examining the front of the house more closely, he perceived that the window in Andreina's sitting-room had been raised about two inches above the sill. "Three keys!" he reflected. "One for the gate, one for the outside door, one for the door of the apartment!" What better proof of his clear-headedness did he need than that triumphant calculation? And yet he realized that he was not as calm as he pretended to be. There had been an imperious, unchaste aggressive something about the dropping of the keys. It had quite disturbed his balance. He noted that he was breathing hard. However, he mastered his emotion, found the key that fitted the gate, opened it, and entered the garden.

XVI

"WHAT time is it?" murmured Andreina, turning her head on the pillow and almost breathing the words upon Pietro's lips.

He answered dreamily, without opening his eyes:

"I have no idea. Certainly very late."

And she, after a silence:

"How long you kept me waiting—I thought you were never going to come!" There was a tone of tense eagerness in her voice that was quite unusual to her. If Pietro was sleepy, she was wide awake. "I sat there at the window for a full hour before you appeared, looking out under the curtains."

"Well," answered Pietro, gradually coming to himself, and surrendering to her tenderness. "You were glad when I did appear at last?"

"Yes," she replied, her lips on his. "But I didn't worry. I was sure you would come—if not at the time you said, then in the morning, or the next day. Anyhow, you would come."

Pietro knitted his eyebrows, without, however, moving.

"Why were you so sure?" he asked.

"We were made for each other," she answered, fervent, intense. "We are so alike in so many ways. After all, what is love? Everybody talks of loving. But give a close look and you see that it's always something else—money, ambition, getting somewhere. For my part I don't believe such a thing as love exists. Take us, for instance! We don't have to call it love. We have a hundred better reasons than love to hold us together."

"What reasons?"

"Why, just consider!" Andreina was speaking in a half-whisper as though she were afraid of being overheard. "How many people we are deceiving, and how well! Now the bad things people do draw them closer together than the good things. I discovered that when I was a very little girl. Matteo is convinced that I adore him. Sofia thinks that you are a sort of saint. What would they say if they could see us now?"

Pietro was not a little disturbed by the merciless penetration of the girl. He tried to evade.

"What makes you think that Sofia takes me for a saint?"

"Why, your whole manner of going about things! Everybody has his own way of lying. You and I stand on exactly the same footing. We are both selfish. We both try to get what we want. I use deceit deliberately and in cold blood. You begin by deceiving yourself. You stew and fret and suffer till you convince yourself that your lies are the truth. Then you feed them to others. That is probably shrewder than my way. Whatever happens afterwards, you are always right. I am always in the wrong. I don't mind that. I prefer to be in the wrong. But coming back to Sofia—what an idiot!" A short, shivering laugh interrupted her analysis. "You must have told her that you were a kind-hearted soul, unselfish, ingenuous, and all the other nonsense you tried to persuade me to believe too. But I told you at the start that we could become lovers without your going to the trouble of convincing me that you were sent by heaven to save my soul. Now Sofia probably believed everything. So you will marry her, and be better and better off." She checked herself, as though to remove a doubt. "Don't misunderstand me. I am not blaming you. It is your talent for deceit that makes us have so much in common. I like you for it. I only wish I were half as clever as you manage to be."

Trembling, quivering, there in the dark, the girl's halting voice betrayed better than any gesture, any expression of her invisible face, could have done, the deep and bitter heartsoreness that induced her to talk in that fashion. Pietro listened with his cheek pressed deep into the pillow, and as he sensed her pain, a flood of half-brotherly compassion again engulfed him, along with an impulse openly to rebel against her insistent and deep-seated despair. As regarded himself, her renewed attack had again shaken him, though he had only to remember his effort to be honest with Sofia to recover complete self-confidence as to his virtuousness.

"So," he began, after a pause, "you think that all that I have said so far, all that I have tried to make you believe, was intended for the sole purpose, as you say, of making you my mistress?"

"More or less," replied Andreina. "You may not have been conscious of it, but that makes no difference. You may never have set out deliberately to deceive Sofia, but you have deceived her, and the proof is that we are here. As I said then—more or less."

Pietro lay thoughtful for a moment, then finally he murmured, attuning his voice to the hot, passionate half-whisper of the woman beside him:

"Well, I think things are just the other way round. In the first place, however hard you try to make yourself out otherwise, you are honest and unselfish by nature. That trait will always be stronger than you, and betray you when you least expect. In the second place, I am just the opposite of what you think I am. In the third place, I really love you and would make any sacrifice to see you free of the situation you are now in. Believe me, Andreina, that is the way I feel at this moment, deeply, sincerely feel. The sentiment is not coupled with any of the calculation or deception that you say must inevitably be present in such things."

The emotion he felt was sharp and distinct, and he thought that he had imparted some of it to his words. He hoped, therefore, that he had convinced Andreina in her turn. But her low, strangely intense voice came back out of the dark.

"That may all be true, but you are here nevertheless, while Sofia is sleeping trustfully at home. You probably told her very much the same things that you have been saying to me. You call your attitude honest and unselfish; but I really cannot see that there is any difference between it and my attitude towards Matteo, which is neither honest nor unselfish, and has never pretended to be. Unless you mean by honesty and unselfishness what I call deceit and calculation! After all, it's more important to agree on the meaning of our words than as to the facts. The facts remain what they are in any event."

What most deeply impressed Pietro was the passionate rancour that he could feel vibrating in her voice and, further, in the strong youthful body that lay at his side.

"I did not intend to tell you," he began after a moment's hesitation, "but you force me to. You will see that the facts are quite different from what you suppose them to be. You are assuming that I have deceived and am deceiving Sofia. That is so little the case that I proposed to her last evening that we break off our engagement and see no more of each other."

"Silly!" whispered Andreina. "And why?"

"Because," he said, with a quiver of anger in his tone, "I am such a hopelessly self-seeking person that an insinuation from you was enough to drive all schemes and pretences from my head."

Since Andreina made no answer, he judged that she had been perplexed by that revelation and could hardly help feeling a certain amount of reluctant veneration for an act that must have seemed almost incomprehensible to her. His heart swelled with a great hope that he had at last dispelled the girl's soul-destroying bitterness. "If it served no other purpose," he reflected, "my talk with Sofia has helped with Andreina."

But the bitter, insinuating voice that he was beginning to find familiar returned:

"She didn't agree, did she? You are still engaged, I imagine!"

He hesitated, again troubled.

"Yes," he finally admitted, "we are still engaged. But I assure you, Andreina, I did everything I could to induce her to release me. Any woman except Sofia would have found in what I said more than sufficient reasons for doing so. Imagine! I told her that I did not love her, and never would, and that I had proposed to her for wholly material reasons. When she refused to believe me and said that I was dreaming, I told her that I had made love to her sister-in-law just a few hours earlier and had almost become her lover. Not even that convinced her. So—what would you have done? I left her and came here."

There was a moment of deep silence. Then Pietro felt the body beside him begin to shake, while there was a sort of choke in the voice that reached his ears. Andreina was laughing.

"If she had any doubts before," she finally managed to whisper, "Sofia is now absolutely certain that you are a sort of saint—in fact, a martyr. Don't you see that you are a genius at deception? You go and tell a girl that you do not love her enough to marry her. You reveal all the hopes and calculations that suggested your proposal. Finally you confess with a blushing faith that you were almost unfaithful to her and refrained from being so only with a heroic effort. I ask you—could one think of a better way than that to strengthen ties and make her more in love with you? Sofia, I am sure, must have gazed in rapt admiration upon such great and fastidious virtue, and become more certain than ever that you were the man for her."

The darkness in front of Pietro's eyes seemed to thicken at that merciless rejoinder.

"Yes," he admitted, "she did just that. But it is nevertheless true that I really wanted her to release me. Besides, what could I have said or done that I did not say or do?"

Andreina laughed again, and then replied:

"There was only one way in which you could have broken with Sofia and at the same time proved your blessed saintliness to me. That was to tell her that you were coming here. If she refused to believe that, or didn't seem to care about it, you could then have gone and told the same thing to Matteo. You were careful not to do either—properly so."

"I did think of telling them that, Andreina," he protested. "I decided not to because I was afraid it might harm you."

"You were right there," she whispered, with another laugh. "If you had, I would have considered you an idiot and a rogue. I would have closed my door in your face and never spoken to you again all my life long. But the fact still stands that that was the only way you had to end the engagement and prove your unselfishness to me. Luckily you did not choose it. . . ." And so saying she threw her arms impulsively about him and drew him to her with an unexpected violence of possession. "Luckily you didn't!" she repeated, panting, and rubbing a cheek on their pillow. "That is why I love you. We are both in the same boat. Deceive them all you can! Use them for all they are worth! They deserve nothing better."

Pietro frowned and did not move.

"I didn't tell them about us," he finally remarked, "but I still can!"

"No, you won't!" asserted Andreina, whispering into his ear and still panting between her words. "What you are going to do is this: You are going to marry her and get rich. And so, from repentance to repentance, from remorse to remorse, you will grow richer and bigger every day. Even if you did tell about us, it would make no difference. You would use your refusal later on for a try at bigger game. For instance, your reputation in society would be improved by it. In view of the talk it causes, a broken engagement is often more profitable than a full-fledged marriage. No, believe me, it's all a question of character, and in character you and I are exactly alike—hopelessly calculating, hopelessly selfish. So then, why insist on being what you never can be? You might imagine you were for a time. In the end your real nature would assert itself."

Frowning into the dark of the room, Pietro lay listening in angry dismay to the eager, relentless argument of the girl beside him. In spite of her somewhat theatrical overstatement, she was, he had to admit, on the whole right, and the admission filled him with a bitterly painful regret; for he could see that in addition to having entangled himself even more inextricably in a game of hypocrisy and interest, he had, in becoming the girl's lover, lost the battle with her despondency, since he had deprived himself of any possibility of exerting the influence he would have liked to have upon her unhappy life. "I should never have made her my mistress," he reflected angrily. "I have lost all prestige with her and played her game." On the other hand, he thought he loved Andreina more than himself, and more than anything or any person else in the world. And that conviction consoled him a little. It would be there to reinforce his firm resolve to make up for past mistakes and improve the lot and the outlook of the girl he loved, even at the price of his own ruin.

With all these reflections trooping through his mind he made no answer, giving Andreina the impression that he was yielding the point, since he could find no further argument. She therefore fell silent in her turn and, giving him another kiss, dropped off to sleep. But Pietro lay there awake, staring with wide-open eyes into the dark, now listening to noises from the street—clacking heels on the sidewalks, automobiles buzzing along the asphalt—now following with bitter lucidity the train of his own thoughts. Now and again the direct glare of a headlight would make its way through the slats of the blinds and brighten the room, and as the bars of light would dart across the ceiling, down the wall, and across the bed, he would have a glimpse of the blanket that covered their two motionless forms, and of the white naked shoulders and the black dishevelled head of the sleeping Andreina. Then he would break off the relentlessly logical course of his reflections, to savour the brotherly, hopeful affection he had for her. He would be tempted almost to awaken her and tell her how much he loved her, and how eager he was to see her change her unhappy view of the world. But by that time the light would be gone again, and in the deeper darkness his mind would return to the conflict between his impulses and aspirations, to what had already happened, and to what, for all of anything that he might do, was almost certain to happen.

PART
TWO

I

In Carlino's sleep school and Maria Luisa blended in a single dream that was fraught with anguish, humiliation, absurdity. He saw himself in the big grey-painted hallway at the high school, waiting to enter a classroom. He felt that it was his first day at school after what is called, in school language, a prolonged absence, due to some reason, good or bad, that he could not remember. He stood looking uncomfortably, now at the closed door of the classroom, now at the big ground-glass windows, beyond which, in the dim light of a rainy winter morning, he could see the faint outlines of the palm trees in the yard. That the weather was terrible outside, he could guess from the louring atmosphere and the rather grim gaiety of his schoolmates, who kept trickling in, one by one, from the corner stairway, stamping their wet shoes that were flecked with sawdust.

They were waiting to go to class, as he was. He could not see their faces, but he was certain that they were all in perfect order with school and with themselves, having learned their lessons to the last comma. An invisible partition seemed to rise between him and them, from the fact that he had not been to school and had not studied for at least a month. What tormented him was a thought that he ought to find out the exact point that the class had reached in the textbook. "If they would tell me just what ground the teacher has covered since I have been away, I could glance over the book while I am standing here, and then during roll-call, and so be prepared to some slight extent." The thought became utter torture. There was a fellow who might do! He had the look of your diligent student who never misses anything—round shoulders, a pale, bloated, pimpled face, long hair cut to stand up on his head, near-sighted behind a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles that made him look like a perfect hypocrite. Carlino stepped up to him and asked where they were in mathematics. The boy complied with terrifying readiness. He took the geometry and flicked the pages off the end of his thumb under Carlino's frightened eyes. What a disaster! A hundred pages, full of theorems, diagrams, logarithms, algebraic symbols! Memorize all that? Carlino knew that he couldn't even read that amount! "What am I to do?" he cried inwardly, his head grown dizzy.

Now there he was in the classroom, with its three rows of seats, the geometry lying open before him. Hurriedly he turned page after page, now and again giving a furtive glance at Maria Luisa, who had the seat next to his. Her presence there in no way surprised him, not even the fact that she was dressed as a schoolgirl, with her name embroidered in white on her black apron, with her hair in braids down her back, and a skirt so short that, looking down, he could see a bit of common white petticoat protruding over a knee that in its turn was covered with a thick woollen stocking.

But the lesson, not she, was on his mind just then. "I've got to be ready!" he cried to himself, feverishly turning the pages. "I've got to answer when the teacher calls on me!" But now the light in the room was growing dimmer and dimmer, and it was almost dark. Glancing up he could see the rain trickling in grey silent lines down the big windowpanes. A flash of lightning, then a roar of thunder coming nearer from afar, shaking the building and rattling the windows, then rolling away into a fitful ill-humoured grumble that left a sense of unspeakable anguish in Carlino's heart! And then, suddenly, he heard his name called by the teacher on the platform. More dead than alive, he rose to go to the blackboard. But who was it, up there in the teacher's seat? It was Maria Luisa, no longer dressed as a schoolgirl, but in the black, tight-fitting, half-mannish frock with a white blouse that he had often seen on her, mornings, at the villa. She was wearing a corsage of gardenias. As she handed him the pointer, she gave him a knowing wink that he understood. She would pretend she had never seen him before, and after a few perfunctory questions, of the easiest, she would send him back to his seat. The little plot amused Carlino. "What idiots, those boys!" he thought. "They think Maria Luisa is my teacher, and not my mistress. They think she is going to put me through the paces!" From the platform he could see himself looking down on his classmates, who sat in the three rows of crowded seats. There, too, was the grey door, closed, there the big windows with their yellow shades, though everything was dark, because of the rain, and the darkness gave a strange relief to the white of Maria Luisa's waist and gardenias, the white that a whitewashed wall might have when seen across a dark cellar. "What idiots!" he repeated joyfully. He could not see their faces very clearly, but he could imagine their disappointment when they saw him issue triumphant from the test! However, his mistress did not ask him any questions. She made him sit down in a chair beside her, then put an arm around his neck and kissed him. He didn't like that! In public? What would the boys say if they saw her kiss him? However, they seemed not to see anything. There they were—fifty pairs of wide-open eyes—and they saw nothing. Instead, Carlino's main dread was that he might lose his balance during Maria Luisa's long embrace and go tumbling down from the platform that had grown tall, tall, enormously tall. His terror was all the greater in that he could see that his chair was resting on two legs, with the other two hanging in space over the abyss. So he clung and clung to Maria Luisa, but her kiss pressed harder and harder, forcing him gradually over the edge, and there was a stern, authoritarian cruelty in her avidness that filled him with terror but also with delight.

There now was the bell. Class was over. And the bell kept on ringing and ringing! He awoke.

The bell was really his alarm clock, which he had set the night before to make sure of getting up at six in the morning. Since it persisted in ringing, he groped about on the nightstand till he found the noisy object and stifled it under the bedclothes. How heavy his head was! And he had a dry pasty feeling in his mouth! Though the room was entirely dark, he realized, from an unusual, uncomfortable something about the bed, and from the very air about him, that he was not in his little bedroom at home, but in a strange place, he could not remember just where.

But as his head gradually cleared, it all came back to him. Yes, he had made up a story the day before at home. He was going for an automobile ride in the country with a schoolmate. He would be gone all day Sunday and perhaps Sunday night. Instead he had gone to Maria Luisa's, certain that she would welcome him with open arms. But no—she had been unpleasant about it, made many unforeseen objections to keeping him overnight, though she had finally consented for just that once. Now it was Monday. He was in terror lest he would not have time to get home, prepare the philosophy lesson that came the first thing in the morning, and be at school in time. "I must be quick!" he thought, sitting up in bed. "I must dress and be off in a hurry!" The alarm had stopped ringing. He took it out from under the bedclothes and set it on the nightstand. Then he turned on the light.

He gave a first glance about the room, which was small and plain, with a few white varnished articles of furniture, but many, many mirrors that seemed to lend a polish even to the solid dusty dark of the night. The little alarm clock sat on the nightstand. He noticed that the hands pointed to eight o'clock and not to six!

For a moment he sat there, stunned, on the bed, unable to understand. On the glass-topped stand, along with the clock and the lamp, were a handful of coins, his cigarette case, his lighter, and his purse. The artificial light, with its suggestion of night, poured over them cosily. Carlino stared at them and thought he was still dreaming. "Eight o'clock! School is about to begin, and I don't know my lessons!" He passed a hand over his forehead, smoothing his hair, and then sat still for a moment, with his elbow raised and his fingers clutching at his dishevelled locks. A sudden paralysing discouragement swept over him.

Really his despondency had remoter origins, and his quite remediable error in setting the alarm clock wrong came to look like a disaster to him only because it was the climax and crown of a slow irresistible process of dereliction that had been going on in him every day since his first encounter with Maria Luisa—it merely brought to overflowing a mounting fear and discontentment that he had so far managed to dissemble and control. For three weeks, he reflected, school exercises had been piling up without his doing one of them. Sleepless nights had left him weary and inattentive in class and at home, and he had had one bad report after another. The avalanche of unexecuted tasks had been gathering momentum, gradually at first, now with rapid and hopeless speed, in rhythm with the growth of his passion for Maria Luisa. For three weeks he had postponed the day's work to the morrow with the firm resolve that he would catch up then. But the morrow would come and go without his having found a free moment to open a book and begin studying again. "Now it is too late," he suddenly concluded. "I can never make up the lost time now. Better do the year over again, or better yet, leave school!"

The thought filled him with a frantic nervousness. He leapt out of bed, hurried to the window, raised the curtain, and looked out.

It was a foggy morning without wind, as was evident from the dull, opaque foliage of the trees in the neighbouring gardens. Over the treetops peered the roofs and upper stories of other villas, the red of the tiles showing as misty as the green of the trees, while all windows were closed, giving the houses that lonely, hermitlike appearance that houses have in the early hours of the morning. The whole prosperous quarter of the city seemed to be still asleep. Not a pedestrian was to be seen on the winding drives that separated the garden walls and gave access to the gates of the many closely packed estates. At the most, some servant might be getting out of bed with a yawn and going to the window, like him, to gaze at that clouded morning.

Carlino surveyed the scene for a time, motionless, half awake, the cold of the floor gradually making its way over his bare feet and legs to bring a shiver to his body. It may have been that the disorderly life he had led for the better part of a month had at last begun to tell on him; or it may have been a deeper instinct in him that spurred him to react against the life of concealment and subterfuge that he had been leading. At any rate, he suddenly felt as though it were impossible to go on in that way any longer. "I can't stand it," he said to himself, flattening his face against the wet windowpanes. "This is impossible. Either I stay here and never go home again, or else I tell the whole story, and give up school for the rest of this year and perhaps for always."

He discarded the first alternative at once as manifestly absurd—he had never considered it as anything more than a point to argue from, or an extreme recourse. So how about the second? He thought at once of the scenes, the quarrels, the strong language, that would follow any confession of his adventure at home. Valentina and the father would both forbid him ever to see Maria Luisa again, both would insist that he continue at school. He bit his lips till they almost bled. The mere thought of being obliged to leave his mistress flooded him with a cruel excited jealousy, his heart beat furiously, and he could have screamed outright from pain. "I'll do nothing of the kind," he cried in his thought, as though addressing his sister and his father, trembling meanwhile and gazing vacantly through the window. "I won't give in! I'll go back and see Maria Luisa this very day!" What angered him especially was the idea that anyone could think of disputing him in holding that his great love and his petty duties at school were incompatible things. That they were seemed to him a fact as unquestionable as the light of the sun, though he realized perfectly well, and with a sense of infinite terror and disgust, that both his sister and his father would regard his plan of leaving school as the silly caprice of a wayward adolescent.

He turned back towards the room that the dim wintry light only half illumined, and stood for a moment looking into space in front of him. The lighted lamp cast a tenuous radiance over the glass top of the nightstand with a vain suggestion of night. A cold dark grey filled all four of the empty corners. Traces of the disorder of the previous evening were pitilessly multiplied by the many mirrors and rendered more conspicuous by the bright newness of the furniture and the polished tiles, one shoe here, another there, a coat with the sleeves turned inside out lying over a chairback, and other articles of clothing scattered about the floor.

Carlino surveyed the wreckage and tried to recall the scene of the night before in its probable course. He had staggered through the door, after drinking too much, his clothes in disarray. Then he had gone to the mirror and carefully scrutinized a pale face with black sparkling eyes. Then he had seated himself on the bed, taken out his purse, found Maria Luisa's picture, and gazed at it, kissing it many times. Finally he had undressed, letting his clothes fall where they might, wound the alarm clock, and set it, after a fashion. Then, dizzy, already half asleep, he had thrust himself between ice-cold sheets in a strange bed.

The rehearsal of that series of acts, so different from anything he could remember from his past, caused him no particular pride. But it did give him an astonished and half-physical sense of the irreparable change that had taken place in him. "I've got to have a talk with father!" he concluded mentally. "Then I'll come back here." The decision helped to calm, if not to remove, his fears. He left the window, went to the head of the bed, and pressed a button that he saw on the wall, thinking to put out the light, which was now quite useless.

The lamp did not go out. Instead he heard the trill of an electric bell in a room far away. "I rang a bell," he thought, annoyed, as he sat down on the bed. "Now the maid will come." He would not have confessed as much to himself, but he did not like the maid, and was ashamed to be found by her in bed, in the morning, in his mistress's house. The call, besides, might be interpreted as an act of stupid and reckless sauciness. He had still another thought. Maria Luisa had lent him a pair of woman's pyjamas, silk, with an abundance of lace trimmings, scented with perfume, loose and flowing in the most unexpected places. It was cut low, particularly in the back, and left him half naked. Uncomfortable, shivering with cold, he sat down on the bed with his elbows gathered between his knees, to wait for the servant to appear.

There was a knock, in fact, in less than a minute, and a short, plump female figure stood in the doorway. The woman did not speak. Moving noiselessly in thickly felted slippers, she approached the bed, with her head slightly inclined to one side and on her lips a smile that was habitual to her, a smile half shrewd, half pleased, that made her look as if she had the sun in her eyes and could not avoid it.

"I rang by mistake—I wanted to put out the light," Carlino explained, looking at the floor, and rubbing the ankle of one foot with the sole of the other. "The marchesa is still asleep?"

"She is not up yet," the woman replied, and in the pale morning light Carlino saw her lift a short leg with a plump muscular calf as she bent over to pick up the clothes that lay scattered about, and arranged them neatly on a chair.

"Will you have breakfast?" she asked, when she had finished, again approaching the bed.

A sort of sneer on the broad pale face of the woman had always annoyed Carlino excessively. He also remembered that his mistress had directed him to give her a tip for this, the first night that he would pass in the house, and he did not know how to go about it. Finally he reached towards the top of the night table, on which he had thrown the silver coins that Maria Luisa had given him for the purpose, took two of them at random, and held them out towards the woman with a straight arm, much as he might offer a lighted match that was emitting a strong and unpleasant odour of sulphur.

"I do not care for any breakfast," he said. "Here—this is for you."

He felt the two coins slip from his hand into the fat soft palm of the maid, then, mortified, his face aflame, he sat waiting with lowered head for her acknowledgment. She did not thank him, however. She did not even speak. Finally he raised his eyes and saw her standing at the head of the bed, turning the coins that he had given her over and over between her fingers.

"You must have made a mistake," she exclaimed at last, brazenly. "These two coins amount to half a lira."

A new and more violent red coloured the boy's cheeks.

"Oh," he cried hurriedly, "excuse me, do excuse me!"

And he brushed into his hand all the money there was on the stand and gave it to her.

"So you don't care for breakfast?" she repeated, as she raised her apron, and with a practised and quite self-contained gesture slipped the money into the pocket of the black dress she was wearing underneath. She stood silent a moment, then she asked with a franker smile:

"But, signorino, is it possible that you do not remember me? Don't you know who I am?"

The boy looked at her.

"I don't, really . . ." he began.

"But I'm Rosa," she interrupted, in a pleased, quiet tone, much as she might have said: "I'm a pretty woman!" "I worked for your people when you were still a child. . . . Later on I was your housekeeper. . . . You were too small to remember now!"

"Rosa? Yes, Rosa!" mused Carlino with no great warmth. He did remember that, whoever the housekeeper may have been, he had disliked her cordially. "Yes, I believe I do remember. . . . Of course!" And he added, irrelevantly: "What are you doing now?"

"I'm maid here, as you see," answered Rosa modestly. There was another moment of silence. "One thing," she resumed suddenly, lowering her eyes but still smiling, "I wish you wouldn't tell the marchesa that I worked in your home. You see, your sister Andreina got me this place through the Marchese Matteo. I wouldn't want her to suspect . . ."

"No, no—of course not!" exclaimed the youth, avoiding her eyes, and not waiting to hear what the marchesa might suspect.

"I won't say anything, Rosa. . . . And where is Andreina now?" He had never seen much of that sister and was not greatly interested in her. He had asked the question more in order to say something than to have an answer. But when the woman mentioned the address, he suddenly remembered that Stefano had often asked him what it was, so that now he would be in a position to tell him. "Number 9 Lungotevere dei Gracchi," he repeated. And he then added, again trying to be agreeable: "How is she?"

The smile on the woman's pale, slightly irregular face had been replaced with a calm that had a trace of bashful humbleness.

"Very well, I believe," she answered. "I don't see her very often." She lowered her head, and the smile was back again, as she asked, looking at the boy from under her eyebrows: "And the professor, how is he?"

"Very well."

"And Valentina?"

"Also doing very well."

The woman stepped away from the bed.

"Well," she said, "if there's nothing else, I'll be going." And as noiselessly as she had entered, she walked to the door in her thick felt shoes and disappeared, closing the door behind her.

Carlino sat as he was for a moment, thinking. "She waited till she got the money," he reflected. "Then she told me who she was." He leapt from the bed, seized the travelling-case that he had brought from home, and ran into the bathroom. His one thought now was to work rapidly. He would not have admitted it, but his one great fear was that the people at home would get the better of him and in some way prevent his seeing Maria Luisa again. He was like a patient asking the surgeon to hurry the operation in order to be freed of the anxiety of waiting. He wished he had had his talk with his father and were back at the villa already. His uncertainty, the disagreeable possibilities of the immediate future, filled him with acutest dread. "They can shriek all they want to!" he kept repeating, indignantly, in order to quiet his inner fears and his burning jealousy. "I shall never leave Maria Luisa." And the asseveration did seem to help. It forearmed him against any surrender to his father and his sister, whom, in actual fact, he was setting out to disobey for the first time in his life.

He hurried his bath, and dressed just as hurriedly. Then softly he opened the door and tiptoed out into the hall. The tiling on the floor glistened faintly in a light that still retained a suggestion of night. The stairway shone bright under a great silent radiance; then three dark closed doors filled out the three walls of the hall. Softly he stole to Maria Luisa's door and opened it. "Just so I don't wake her up!" he thought. The room inside was totally dark. He groped about the wall for the switch and turned on the light, very softly. Four lamps with pink shades, placed in the four corners of the ceiling, came on. In that murky light the room seemed to him cramped and close, with the few chairs covered with soft garments that hung loose and disordered, with the floor littered with stockings and shoes, and across the room, in front of the window with closed blinds, the dressing-table, a dirty white, with its ribbons and draperies soiled and faded, like a great withered chrysanthemum dressed up in swaddling-clothes.

However, he was not interested in the room. Turning towards the bed, he advanced a careful furtive step on the carpet and bent over the sleeping woman.

One arm and her whole bosom were lying free of the covers. Her posture seemed to suggest anxiety. Her head was sunk low on the back of the pillow so that her throat was thrown up and forward. Her lips were half opened. The short hair on the back of her head seemed to be driving a number of black moist locks into the white of her full round shoulders. Distressing was the contrast between her dark, hard, almost masculine head and the arms and chest, which, relaxed in repose under the soft lace of her nightgown, seemed exquisitely feminine and whiter and plumper than they really were. Whether from the strained position of her head or a natural conformation of her larynx, Maria Luisa breathed heavily when she slept, a short snore issuing at regular intervals from her half-opened mouth. She seemed to be breathing in her throat rather than in her lungs.

Carlino stood looking at her, motionless, his passionate and reverent contemplation softened by an almost filial gratitude. He felt quite unworthy of such a woman! The fact that she had deigned to notice him, that she had consented to belong to him, seemed the most evident mark of her infinite generosity. "No woman of her station and her beauty," he thought, "would ever have dreamed of doing for me what she has done." And his eyes brimmed with tears. "No other woman would ever have noticed that I existed, let alone being interested in me! I can never repay her for all that I owe." With a greediness fraught with anticipated sorrow he tried to fix in his memory the colour and shape of her arms, and the expression of her face, half consciously mourning the fact that he could never detach the sight of the loved object before him from the fear of one day losing her for ever.

Suddenly Maria Luisa drew a deep breath, and gave a sort of sigh. He was afraid he had wakened her. He bent lower, grazed her naked arm with his lips, then, on tiptoe as he had entered, stole to the door, turned off the light, and left the room.

From the upper hall he continued tiptoeing down the stairs, resting most of his weight on the banister. A smell of toasting bread, of cold air and damp fog, met his nostrils in the lower hall. The dining-room door was open wide, and so were the windows. The centre rug had been rolled up around the table, and the chairs were piled by twos, one on the other. Near the door stood a broom and a vacuum cleaner. Carlino put on his overcoat and stepped out into the garden.

Shivering with cold, his teeth chattering, with an empty feeling in the pit of his stomach from lack of breakfast, he hurried along the side street to the broad avenue, and stood waiting for the bus on the curbed safety area between the two auto tracks. Very few pedestrians were to be seen on the sidewalks with the empty benches under the leafless linden trees, or passing the black and gilded fences that protected the private gardens from the outer world without concealing them. No one was waiting for the same bus at his station. Here and there in the far distance he could see through the fog a servant going to morning market with a basket, or a beggar with a faded, tattered overcoat stuffed with rags to afford greater warmth. A few people rode by on bicycles. He noted a couple of carabinieri marching on their patrol side by side. His bus appeared and came roaring up to swallow him rapidly through its folding doors, and away it sped from station to station toward the distant reddish walls that closed the perspective of the avenue towards the city.

He felt tired, sleepy, worn out. But then again that depression, that weariness, had its delights for him. The humdrum regularity of life at school was still too recent a past for him not to yield to a self-satisfied wonder at finding himself engaged in an adventure of which dullness and fatigue were, along with the ideal thrilling within him, the most convincing symptoms. Yet whenever he thought of what he was about to do, a fear of being bludgeoned into obedience to those at home would take possession of him.

It was in just such a mood of well-grounded dread that he reached the door of his apartment house. He ran up the grey echoing stairway two steps at a time. That was the hour when, normally, he should have been leaving for school. Instead of leaping free and furtive up that shaft he should normally have been going down, unhappy, unwilling, with a pack of books under his arm. His home was all too familiar to him, and he was entering it a stranger! Such an exact reversal of all his ordinary habits filled him with what amounted to intoxication. The apartment door was part way open. Cautiously he made his way into the dark corridor, where the air was still heavy and close from the night. "So now?" he thought, as he hung his hat and overcoat on the hanger. "So now?"

He heard a footstep in the kitchen, the noise of a spoon stirring sugar in a cup, finally a cough. He opened the kitchen door and entered.

II

SEATED with his back to the door at the marble-topped table between the stove and the sink, in a light that was appreciably dimmed by the towels that had been hung across the window to dry, the professor was sipping at a cup of coffee, and to judge by the wry faces he kept making behind his beard and by the fierce glances he kept darting into his cup, he was finding the brew more detestable than usual. At the sound Carlino made in entering he turned with a movement that was quick but absent-minded, and looked at him over the tops of his glasses.

"Oh, it's you! Glad you're back!"

It was his ordinary, indifferent voice.

"He hasn't noticed anything!" concluded Carlino, not a little surprised that his father should not have remarked on the strangeness of his presence at that hour when he should have been on his way to school.

His heart began to pound, however, as he took one of the rough cane-seated kitchen chairs and sat down in it, self-consciously.

"Where's Valentina?" he asked. "Out?"

"Out!" commented the professor, who was back with his coffee again, and did not bother to look around. "Why should she be out?"

"Why, at the clinic!" cried the boy, astounded.

"What clinic?"

Carlino was out of touch with reality again.

"Has she lost her job?" he asked, faintly.

The professor looked around with his sternest professional frown.

"It's you who have lost your brains. Left them somewhere on that ride in the country! She doesn't work Sundays. What are you talking about?" He gave another glance of withering scorn, then turned back to his cup again. "She's in her room," he finally added, to close the question.

Carlino's mind began to clear. "What an idiot!" he thought. "Of course! Yesterday was Saturday, not Sunday. Today is Sunday, not Monday. That's what I get for drinking too much last night." A great sense of relief came over him and with it a temptation to abandon the idea of having the talk with his father, to go on with the secret life he had been leading, studying little if at all, lying to his family, and drifting sweetly and softly to ruin over the road of unproductive, sleepy days. He was himself surprised, however, at the impulse of intolerant frankness that made him stick to his earlier resolve.

"Papa," he began, in a halting tone, "I must have a talk with you."

"With me?" And the professor's face was overspread with untold wonder. "A talk with me?"

"Yes," said the boy, with a gesture of entreaty. "Only you must promise not to get angry!"

The professor tried to hide his curiosity behind a pose of parental sternness.

"Oh!" he said. "So I mustn't get angry! That means that you admit you have been doing wrong. . . . Well, what have you to say for yourself?"

Melodramatic scenes, stormy quarrels where rebukes and epithets were shouted back and forth, had featured in the professor's home life ever since Carlino could remember. He thought of his father as stern and tiresome, both at once. At that moment he was filled with an almost physical sense of fear and annoyance that no amount of calm reasoning could have dispelled.

"Yes," he insisted, "but you must promise not to get angry!"

The professor raised an admonishing arm.

"I don't make promises," he announced solemnly. "All you can expect from me is a just but considerate severity. . . . Speak then! What have you done?"

"What I have done," proffered Carlino, pale, nervous, "is not open a book or write a line for three weeks past. So I have fallen too far behind the class. I have therefore decided to leave school! That's what I've done."

The professor was taken completely by surprise. He sat open-mouthed for a moment, his brow gradually knitting into heavy pallid wrinkles.

"Is that all?" he finally asked.

"What do you mean—is that all?" repeated Carlino, thoroughly amazed.

"I mean is that all?" The professor spoke the words in his most positive tone, studying his son over the tops of his glasses. "You haven't, for example, robbed anybody or killed anybody? Think while there is still time—scour your memory! You have committed no crime? You have taken no part in a hold-up somewhere? . . . Give me the whole story—don't be afraid! I prefer to take it in one dose. That is what I am here for. Tell me everything you have to say. Go on!"

"But, papa," stammered the boy, "there isn't anything else. Let me explain——"

"Explain nothing!" thundered the parent, straightening up in his chair. "Don't try to explain! Try to remember! Remember what I said to your sister, Andreina, many years ago, when she announced her intention of going to live away from home. 'You have ceased to be my daughter,' I said. 'For me you have ceased to exist. . . . Go—I pronounce my curse upon you!' That's what I said. Now look out, lest I have to say the same to you. Beware, Carlino!"

"But let me explain, papa!"

"I want no explanations!" And the professor rose from his chair, stamped excitedly a number of times about the kitchen, then sat down at the table again. "Three weeks without opening a book!" he finally resumed. "Three weeks without writing a line! And he wants to leave school to boot! What am I going to say to my old friend and colleague Professor Buonocuore, to whom I recommended you at the beginning of the year! What will he think of me? Professor Malacrida, he will go around saying, sent me a worthless brat, an idler, a good-for-nothing. . . . Three weeks without studying—and leaving school to boot! At any rate," he added, "perhaps I shall have the satisfaction of learning what you have been doing during these three weeks."

"But, papa," protested the youth, at the height of his nervousness, "unless you let me speak . . ."

"Well," replied the professor, with a sigh of resignation. "Say on! I am prepared for anything!"

Partly in fear, partly in shame, Carlino felt his courage fail him again. But he forced himself:

"You know—that sister of Signor Davico! She came here one afternoon! . . ."

The professor was feverishly twisting the ends of his moustache. There was an anxious look in his eyes, his brow was deeply wrinkled.

"Yes, I remember. Well? . . ."

"Well, three weeks ago she told me to go and call on her at her house. I went and . . ."

"And . . . ?"

The boy lowered his eyes half in pride, half in embarrassment.

"Well, that day . . . to make a long story short . . . I . . . she . . . we fell in love!"

"I see," said the professor, who did not see anything. He had rested his elbows on the table with a distracted, absent-minded air. "You fell in love—I understand." He seemed to ponder the matter deeply; then his face brightened with a sudden idea. "You are not trying to tell me—you . . . a schoolboy, son of Professor Renato Malacrida, Chevalier of the Crown . . . You have made that lady your mistress? Signor Davico's sister in love with you?!"

His father's incredulousness was flattering enough to Carlino's vanity, but he could not help feeling a certain amount of disappointment that there had been no thunderclap so far. He didn't feel that he deserved a very harsh rebuke, but he had grown accustomed to thinking that in such circumstances a father was virtually required to make a show of being scandalized.

"Yes," he nodded, sheepishly. "I did. I——"

The professor did not allow him to finish.

"Just a moment—how did it all happen?" He spoke in a feverish eagerness, and it was clear that his severity and reprobation as a father had entirely succumbed to an instinctive and uncontrollable curiosity. "Let's see now. . . . She told you to come to her house. . . . You went. . . . She receives you in the drawing-room, shows you to a seat on the sofa? Then she begins to talk, sighing every so often, looking at you with eyes that . . . Then all of a sudden she gives in, and throws her arms about your neck. . . ."

Carlino's face had reddened. He did not like the eager facial expression with which his father had seized upon the incident. His shame and disappointment deepened.

"Yes," he finally agreed. "That was not just what happened, but it amounted to that. . . ."

The professor seemed to have been plunged into a deep meditation.

"A woman of position!" he finally resumed. "You know, in my time I too had unusual luck with women. There was a gentlewoman in my town, a person of rare character—divinely beautiful. She fell madly in love with me, and one night she left her home and came to see me in order to propose deserting everything, husband, family, children—she had two lovely little children—and running away with me! What would a person have done in my place? He would have accepted and been proud of it! But I didn't. It almost broke my heart, but I didn't! I persuaded her to stick to her home, not to ruin the lives of so many different people, to bury the thought of our love in the deepest forgetfulness. . . . I have never seen her since. . . ." There was a moment's silence. Then the professor added, returning directly and without shadings to his earlier morbid manner: "So, after that first visit, you went back, of course . . . who can guess how many times! . . ."

"I went every day," the boy explained, almost eager now to have the rebuke that he had feared and which had not materialized. "That's why I didn't study," he finally suggested.

The professor seemed not to have heard.

"And the husband?" he finally inquired, in sudden anxiety. "The husband knows nothing about it? Look out, Carlino, look out! You keep your eye peeled! When you least expect it, paff! The fry is ready and you are in the pan. . . . Terrible, those husbands, sometimes!"

Carlino could not have been more puzzled. He would have preferred a ranting severity, not such counsel of prudence. He felt also that his father had not grasped the true character of his relations with Maria Luisa, and the old man's free as well as purposeless chatter somehow shocked him.

"She has quarrelled with her husband," he replied gravely. "You see, he lives on her money. But that is not what I wanted to talk to you about, papa."

The professor interrupted him:

"So she has quarrelled with her husband." His face became very thoughtful. "And the husband, I hear, is the man who has promised to marry your sister Andreina."

"In that case," Carlino could not help exclaiming, "they will marry without a penny. Maria Luisa told me she intended to leave her husband the beggar she found him."

"She says that!" echoed the professor, pulling at his moustache perplexedly, and gazing dreamily out of the window. "Do you think she will? People say so many things. . . ."

Entirely bewildered now, Carlino made no answer. The important thing with him was to learn whether he could leave school or not. Partly out of discouragement at the amount of work he had neglected, partly out of a vague yearning for a richer, freer life than he knew at school, he was more inclined to drop his studies than to try to make them up. But the strange failure of his father to show any wrath whatever troubled him greatly. He felt somehow that it was his father's duty to be severe and fair, just as, on his side, it was his privilege to evade punishment and soften rebukes as far as he could. But the professor was buried in thoughts of his own and had no remotest suspicion of the difficult task his son was laying upon him. Carlino almost regretted his dubious victory, which he had won beyond his deserts and without a battle. He sat thoughtful, with lowered head.

"I must tell you," he finally ventured, in a vague intent of stirring the sense of responsibility that lay inert in his father's mind. "I must tell you that I lied to you yesterday. It was not true that I had an invitation to go on a ride in the country. I wanted to spend a night with Maria Luisa, and didn't know how to arrange it."

"So you thought up that cock-and-bull story." The professor shook his head, but with no trace of indignation. Then pensive, dreamily returning to times past, he resumed: "I acted in the very same way when I was your age." He looked absently out of the window, stroking his beard. "My father wanted me to study. I pretended to shut myself up in my room with my books. But the moment my father turned his back, I was out looking for the maid in our house—a pretty brunette, with a body—a body like a statue, and madly in love with me! Finally father caught us, and there was a terrible to-do. In the end he served us with the *aut-aut:* I should either give her up and never see her again, or else leave home. What could I do? On the one hand stood my love—the passion of a sixteen-year-old boy, and the woman whom I loved and who had given herself to me with reckless devotion. On the other side stood duty. Well, I yielded. I chose duty. She left the house, weeping as if her heart would break. I never saw her again. Father did not speak to me for a whole month. . . . Oh, those were the days! Those were the days!"

Annoyance at this comparison between his father's ancillary adventures and his own affair seemed to rouse the boy, especially since the old man's story implied the threat of an injunction. He responded vigorously:

"But I love Maria Luisa. I love her truly. I shall not leave her under any condition."

"What's that got to do with it?" commented the professor, in the most natural and conciliatory tone in the world. "Nobody is asking you to leave her. It's a different situation altogether—different sorts of people, different circumstances. Besides, I respect the feelings of other people, whatever they may be. Oh, yes, when it's a question of sentiment, I take off my hat." The faraway look was in his eyes again as he sat stroking his beard. "We are all young once. We have all loved and been loved. I said as much in my little volume of poetry that you, of course, have not read. There is the sonnet, 'Remembrance,' where I write:

I too knew love in years now long since dead,
I too knew eyes that gleamed with heavenly passion.
Now age has come and in its cruel fashion
It leaves me only joys on memory fed. . . .

And so on, and so on. . . ."

The professor was quite stirred by his declamation. He took off his glasses and began to wipe them, in order to allow the little attack of vanity that had induced him to quote himself to spend its force. Then he put them on again, and leaned forward with an expression of sudden doubt that was both confidential and apprehensive.

"How is she, really?" he asked. "I got the merest glimpse of her here. There was no doubt that she had qualities—good looks, a distinguished bearing, stylish clothes. But I got an impression that she was—how shall I say—a little cold. These modern women, you know . . ."

Relieved of the dread that his father might insist on his breaking with Maria Luisa, Carlino still had that other torment on his soul, the question of school, which, more out of despair than conviction, he wanted to leave or be ordered to leave.

"Papa, please," he entreated. "Let's forget Maria Luisa! What troubles me is—I don't know what to do about school. I am so far behind I could never catch up this year. On the other hand I feel as though it would be a mistake to drop out now!" And he took his head in his two hands desperately. His pitiable state of mind seemed to make no impression on the father. The latter was still wool-gathering among his own memories. "I'm all at loose ends," Carlino resumed, in growing nervousness. "When I think of all that the class has done and that I have not done, I just go dizzy. Half a geometry, and I don't know how many pages of Latin and Greek! I say nothing of philosophy, chemistry, physics, and all the rest." And in a burst of boyish unhappiness he plunged his hands into his hair and pulled at it angrily, finally lifting a blanched, terrified face upon his father.

But the professor's bearded face betrayed an insistent, abstracted, and half-fantastic prepossession, rather than that fluid human comprehension that Carlino needed. He finally answered:

"You ask me what you ought to do. Well, if my own efforts had been appreciated, if my own devoted activity as a teacher and a citizen had been recognized with the reward they deserved, I should not hesitate a moment. I should say: Leave that woman and go back with rekindled energy to your studies. But nothing of the sort took place. I was slandered. A conspiracy of envious rivals cut short my career at fifty—at the height of my powers, in other words. If it were not for the lessons I give, for what your sister Valentina earns, for the rent we get for that room, I should be forced to ask for alms. So I say: Do as you please! Do as you think best! If you feel yourself the man to face the troubles, the disappointments, the ill-treatment, that have poisoned my life, go on as you are. If you feel yourself fitted for some sort of work not connected with teaching, make a change. Not for all the money in the world would I encourage you to do anything that you might later regret."

The boy gazed at his father in bitter fascination.

"What could I do?" he asked.

"You might become a newspaperman," the professor continued, unperturbed. "That Monatti fellow, who is coming to see Signor Davico all the time—he is a fine-looking, attractive young man. He told me the other day that he hadn't even finished high school, and yet he has made more money in a few years than I have made in my whole life. Of course, you have to know how to do it, but if you can learn the trick, there you are—important people, free tickets for the trains, complimentary tickets for the theatres, and even for the cinema! . . ."

So the professor, in his monotonous classroom voice, stroking his beard! Carlino sat with lowered head listening inattentively, the room in a whirl about him. His disappointment was cruel, final, complete. It had been, he thought, like going down a flight of stairs in the dark and finding the last step missing. His inner discomfort was intensified by his physical weariness. The cool morning air had given him a deceptive buoyancy. Now the overdrinking of the night before was beginning to make itself felt in chills, headache, and a sort of nausea. The dirty, ill-lighted kitchen, the marble-topped table with rings of coffee from his father's cup, the father himself, all grated on his nerves. He gave his clouded head a toss, rose to his feet, and asked:

"Where is Signor Davico?"

"He's just getting up," replied the professor. "I heard him moving about. He must be dressed."

Without saying a word, Carlino turned and stepped out into the hall.

III

Audible, there, was the faint languid music from the guitar that the sick man was thrumming as usual. Carlino, however, went straight to his own door, half numb, unsteady on his legs, his movements badly co-ordinated, so that he collided with the bookshelves and the sideboard in the corridor. In his little bedroom the cold light reflected indirectly from the court fell full upon his bed, the flat pillow, the coverlet carefully tucked in around the lean mattress, the black iron frame, while the study table, the bookcase, and the bureau stood in shadow. Under those circumstances the chamber had that appearance of disagreeable neatness that is familiar to people who have been out all night and return home in the morning uncertain whether to go to bed or to begin applying themselves at once to the day's tasks.

The experience was new to Carlino. Uncertainty about his future and the disorder he was in probably increased his sensitiveness. At any rate the frigid welcome that his retreat seemed to give him increased the nervous despondency that his parent's attitude and remarks had already aroused. Perplexed, not knowing whether to lie down or sit down, or what else to do, he walked about the room, touching with his fingers now one object, now another, as though to reassure himself as to their nature and the uses to which they were put. Finally he went to the window and stood with his back resting against the frame and one hand on the sill, gazing as though enchanted through the annoyingly defective panes at the palm trees and flower gardens in the court below.

He stood there for a long time, motionless, deep in thought. One thing was evident. There was now no obstacle left to his continuing his relations with Maria Luisa. But far from giving him the relief and satisfaction that he had expected, that victory seemed to fill him with regret and disappointment. It was also clear that no one would prevent him now from gradually abandoning school, where the work had come to seem so petty and miserable after his exciting adventure with Maria Luisa and the new and insatiable longings that had been born of it. So long as he had foreseen opposition, he had been determined to leave school, regardless of consequences. Now he was obsessed with fears for his future, and with a paralysing sense of worthlessness and impending disaster. Those doubts and qualms were not strong enough, however, to spur him to any decision. He had only to think of a caress, a word, an act, an attitude, of Maria Luisa to find himself thrilling again with his furious passion. But they did bring into relief a certain unsatisfactory aspect of his affair, along with a definite sense of loneliness and perplexity. He was alone in the world. There was no one who could help him or give him counsel. Any resolve he might formulate would be born of a confusion of fears and yearnings, and whatever it might be, it would surely plunge him into another and worse confusion.

As he stood there, the unfriendly neatness of his unoccupied bedroom became all but intolerable. Where could he go? But his eyes chanced to fall on his table, and it suddenly occurred to him that he still might breast the current of discouragement and fatigue, go back to work, and catch up in his studies. He had a whole Sunday before him. He would work late into the night until he was too tired to go on. So he could do on the days following, and in no time would be on a par with the class!

Sanguine, energetic, he sat down at the table, took a copybook, a Greek text, and a dictionary, and began to translate at the point where he had left off a fortnight before. At first everything seemed easy, too easy. He translated a number of sentences, stopping every now and then to estimate the amount of work he still had to do. Then he came upon a difficulty. Twenty minutes passed in vain efforts to solve it. The page in his copybook that had begun so neatly and fluently became a maze of erasures and cancellations. The words in the dictionary began to dance in front of his eyes. Suddenly, with a more nervous and violent gesture than usual, he upset his inkwell. He broke off writing to clean away the ink as best he could. By that time he had decided to begin with some subject other than Greek.

He picked up one textbook after another, mentally calculating for each subject the amount of work that lay before him. The prospect stunned him. He was far, irreparably far behind in every course! That was not the worst of it. A month of idleness and dislike had allowed him to forget much, and his capacity for rapid work was dulled. He sat back in his chair, overwhelmed. There could be no doubt! He would never catch up that year. Even if he could, he was in no condition to work that day.

A chill came over him, and a sluggish feeling. He sat with his eyes glued to the books that were piled high on his work table, and as he gazed at them he shook his head bitterly, while a shiver ran up and down his frame. He got up, went to his bed, mechanically removed his shoes, and finally lay down, facing the wall, drawing his bent knees as high as he could for greater warmth.

His bedroom, once upon a time, had been a little parlour, and the old paper, with a flower design now faded, still covered the wall in front of him. Whenever he raised his eyes, he could see, a foot or two above the bed, one of those cheap religious images that represent the Madonna with a crown of thorns on Her head, Her eyes turned heavenward, and a finger pointing to Her visible bleeding heart. Next to the image was a picture of his mother in a small circular wooden frame. She had died, still young, at the birth of little Maddalena, while Carlino was still a growing boy. As he lay there, his eyes chanced to rest on the photograph. Finally he reached up, unhooked the frame, and held it out in front of him.

It was an old picture, showing the head, chest, and shoulders, with the black hair dressed high on the forehead in an out-of-date style. The black, intense eyes of the mother were those of Andreina, but with a different expression—softer. The nose was short and straight-cut, the lips rich and full. The face had a certain rustic charm, but what struck the attention was a suggestion of determined, if not actually obstinate, earnestness that came from the hard outline of the forehead, the cast of the eyes, the set of the mouth. She must have been a strong, proud, self-reliant creature—the exact opposite of her husband; and just so the professor himself portrayed her on the few occasions when he chanced to mention her name. Partly out of a child's longing for protection, partly as a response to the ineptness of the father, of which he could not help being at least vaguely conscious, Carlino had come to give his dead mother a much more important place in his thoughts than he allowed to his father, to Valentina, or any of the other living members of his family.

It had been a slow process, beginning perhaps about his twelfth year. Then gradually, as he became more conscious of his own personality and situation, his secret and imaginative affection for this mother, whom he had known so little, was deepened and enriched. But just as he had never been fully aware of his true attitude towards his father, so he had never been fully aware of the strength and character of these other, and so different, filial sentiments. Quite naturally he found his eyes lingering longer and more often upon his mother's image, and quite as naturally he had come to wonder, at each little crisis that arose in his boy's life, just what his mother would have said, just how she would have acted, under one set of circumstances or another.

And yet, that day, to reach up and unhook the picture and hold it out in front of him, had been a largely habitual, half-mechanical act. He gazed at the dark yellowed photograph for a time. Then, under pressure of his discouragement, bewilderment, fatigue, a strange confusion took place in his mind between the posthumous devotion he paid to his vanished mother and his new passion for Maria Luisa. Different as they were, he could think of the two women only as very close to each other and very much alike, sharing as they did his own excited love. Only his mother, he thought, the woman with the bright, intent eyes and the too sober face, could understand a passion such as he had for Maria Luisa; and only to Maria Luisa could he reveal, without fear of being ridiculed or misinterpreted, the secret, unconfessed dialogues he held with his dead parent. His eyes filled with tears, and he writhed on the bed, murmuring broken sentences of a sort of prayer. All the worries and anxieties of the past month were overflowing in his tortured, bursting spirit and finding concrete expression in that strange mixture of the sentiments he held towards his mother and the feelings he had for the woman he loved. Yet he was well aware that he did not love them both in the same way, and that there was even something improper and irreverent in his associating them so closely.

However, his need of sleep was stronger than his need of consolation. His eyes still wet, his heart still full, he finally fell into a doze.

It must have lasted for an hour—light, transparent. Not once did he lose consciousness of being stretched out there on his undisturbed bed, fully dressed and in his stockinged feet. And he knew all the time that his chilly silent bedroom was gradually warming. Finally he awoke and sat up with a violent start. There was his mother's picture still in his hand. The weather had cleared outside and a bright warm sun was shining, flooding the room with light and making it seem less cold. Even the furniture about him was less stiff and uncommunicative now. From the kitchen, near by, came a monotonous but joyous sound—the maid was chopping onions for a sauce on the wooden mixing-board.

He awoke with a sense of alarm, however. He had resolved to see Maria Luisa at luncheon that day, and he was afraid it was too late. A glance at his watch reassured him. It was only eleven o'clock. He hastily returned the picture to its nail on the wall, got off the bed, put on his shoes, and after washing his face and hands in cold water, stepped out of the room.

He walked along the corridor to Stefano's door, then stopped and listened. He had hoped that Stefano would be alone. From within, instead, he could hear Valentina's voice, and she was talking not in her usual good-natured tone, but in a vehement excitement that seemed to suggest bitterness, passion, indignation. His first impulse was to go away without wishing the invalid good-morning, but then he thought of the hour he still had to spend before luncheon time. He pushed the door and went in.

Stefano was lying on the sofa near the window, fully dressed. One of the blinds was open, the other closed, leaving half of the room bright with a steady, indirect light from the court, while the other half lay in that thin musty semi-shadow that is peculiar to rooms in which people have been sleeping with closed windows, and where the heavy air has not been renewed.

The bed was still unmade. A pair of slippers lay on the bed-rug, one on a corner pointing in one direction, the other in the middle pointing in another direction. The washbowl was half full of soapy water. A glass of water on the commode had warmed during the night and sat there lined with bubbles. Everything contributed to the sense of disorderliness and discomfort of a room still unmade in which the occupant is, for some reason, obliged to linger.

Since visiting at Maria Luisa's so often, Carlino had grown accustomed to elegance and neatness. He was suddenly struck by the dirty appearance of Stefano's room. "How can people live in such places?" he asked himself, stepping forward.

But Stefano and Valentina were too deeply absorbed in their argument to be conscious of the boy's entrance, let alone of the unæsthetic properties of the room. Stefano did not look up, and Valentina merely gave an indifferent glance in Carlino's direction before she went back to the discussion again.

"No, there's no use in your talking," she said, addressing the invalid, and apparently summarizing a long argument. "You will never get it out of me."

Stefano smiled the forced and discomfited smile of a person who has failed to attain a purpose.

"But now see here, Valentina," he said, in a half-coaxing tone. "You are an intelligent girl and you know the world."

"More flattery!" Valentina interrupted, abrupt, good-natured.

"Why do you say that?" asked the other, puzzled.

"Oh, I see through you!" she rejoined.

"Well, as I was saying," Stefano resumed, with the counterfeit, condescending considerateness of the gentleman who is willing to argue with a person beneath him in order to get something he wants. "You are intelligent, and you have lived, and you can therefore see without my explaining in detail that, for the very reason that so many years have passed, things have completely changed. Unless I am mistaken, what you are afraid of is that I will only go and start over again. Well, first of all, I am not the same sort of man I was then, and I am very sorry I acted as I did. But then again, don't you admit that it takes two to create certain situations? My affection for the person in question you surely cannot doubt. . . ."

"That's the very thing I doubt!" interposed Valentina.

Stefano smiled as though he were minded rather to make light of the insult than to be offended by it. He continued persistently:

"You cannot be so stupid as to fail to understand that I am fond, very, very fond, of that person. Now when a man says a thing like that, it means something, and though you pretend to believe the contrary, you know it isn't so. . . . So then, to go back to the point—don't you see that my fondness for that person will prevent me—in case you are kind enough to arrange for another meeting—I don't say from beginning all over again—that is out of the question—but from doing anything that could possibly interfere with a—how shall I say—with an auspicious event that you consider so important?"

"Now no insinuations, please!" warned Valentina, her face darkening, her mistrustful suspicions aroused. "Just you omit your insinuations!"

Stefano's courteous, half-pitying smile came back.

"Why so suspicious, Valentina—why so touchy? And what insinuations? Aren't you anxious for the marriage? Don't you consider it very important?"

"Yes, I do," the girl admitted, fearing a trap. "That's the very reason why . . ."

"Well, I am looking forward to it too," Stefano interrupted. "I want it much more than you do. You know perfectly well that when that person is settled and happy, it will be a great relief to me. You can therefore be sure that I will go no farther than to resume an old friendship, be more or less in that person's society, at the most help with good advice now and then. . . . That's the whole story. . . . I don't know whether I have made myself clear. . . ."

There was a moment's silence. Finally Valentina answered with the same hostile, mistrustful expression:

"You always make yourself perfectly clear. Doing just that is your great point! But you're not going to fool me. . . . I learned a lesson once, and since then I have been keeping my eye peeled. Seeing that you are so good at making things clear, perhaps you can clear up one more thing. So long as you had hopes of your sister and her money, and of the women she was going to introduce to you, you never once inquired about that person, you never once thought of her. She might have married, she might have been dead. It was all the same to you. But when you saw that you could not count on your sister, and that in the state you were in and your pocketbook was in, women, and certain women in particular, would have nothing to do with you—why, then you began to think of that other person, pretend you were fond of her, beg me to arrange for you to see her again, and all the other nonsense. Now, sir, make that clear, if you can."

An expression of annoyance drifted across Stefano's faded eyes, but he found a way to smile his long-suffering smile again.

"Now see here, Valentina, when you are in that sort of temper, why, there's no talking with you. I really ought to feel insulted every other minute. But luckily I know you well, very well, and I realize what a good soul you are. I know too that when you are in a bad humour, the way you are now, nothing you say is to be taken seriously. Why didn't I inquire about that person? Why, because I knew just how you felt, how you had every reason to feel. So I was not anxious to hurry things. I thought it would be more tactful to let things drift along, and bring the matter up when a good chance offered."

"You tactful!" she exclaimed, boiling. "You worrying about how people feel! Really, now, do you take me for a goose?"

At that outburst, under the shiny skin that covered Stefano's fat jaws there was a brutal, angry play of muscles. But again he managed to control his resentment. With a sigh of affected resignation, he replied:

"Supposing I do take you for a goose! That does not alter the fact that I refrained from speaking of her, or inquiring after her, for the reasons I stated. . . . There could have been no other reason, could there?"

Valentina chose to overlook the unpleasant implication of that last remark.

"Perhaps you'll let me try to clear the thing up for myself. Do you know the proverb—'Bread of vetches for penniless wretches'? Too bad your education was neglected, for it fits your case to a T. The truth is, you forgot all about that person so long as you hoped your sister would come along with a duchess or a princess. But when you saw the road closed in that direction, you said to yourself: 'Well, what's the harm of trying? She's a woman, after all.' And it was then too that you discovered your fondness for her. Now there you have the story, just as it happened."

That the blow told, there could have been no doubt, but the smile on Stefano's face was ineradicable.

"That's your story, of course; but you've got to admit that once in a rare while even what you say fails to hit the mark. Besides, Valentina—and just try, if you can, to think without talking all off the point!—you say that women refuse to have anything to do with me. True, true! But in that case, where could the harm be? Why should that person be different from other women and do something that they refuse to do—in other words, fall in love with a poor devil like me, lame, sick, and a beggar to boot?"

Valentina looked at him sidewise, and answered, almost hissing:

"I know why, you sly rascal! But anyhow, why all this talk? You are never going to get me to tell you a thing that I simply refuse to tell you." She paused, gazing with a frown into space in front of her. "Besides," she added, rising suddenly, "in your place I wouldn't try to be so much of a bully. Your sister was on the right track when she told you you ought to be trying to get well before it is too late. And I would say for myself that you ought to be thinking of the sins you have on your conscience and all the wicked things you have done. You ought to be ashamed of them, if there's any shame in you—and change before it is too late." By that time she had reached the door. "I'll go and get the things for your injection," she added, dryly. "I'll be right back."

And she disappeared into the hall.

Stefano seemed to sink into a deep meditation after Valentina had gone. But finally he looked around at Carlino and commanded:

"Hand me my crutches!"

Carlino rose and gave them to him. The invalid got up, adjusted the crutches to his armpits, and then, silent, with lowered head, began to walk with long, heavy, laborious lunges back and forth across the dark disorderly room. Carlino knew the meaning of that silent, furious cripple's promenade. Stefano resorted to it whenever he was too worried or excited to lie still and had to have some means of relieving his inner tension. Finally the boy saw him stop at the window, bend his head with one shoulder high and the other low, and peer at something down in the courtyard.

"Know that girl down there?" he asked, looking around.

Carlino approached the window and looked down in his turn. At first all that he could see was the court, with its lean palm trees, its cement walks, two or three janitor's helpers engaged with various tasks. But following Stefano's pointing finger to a window across the court on a lower floor, he spied a plump, dark-haired servant girl in a light-blue apron, who was busy at her morning housework and was piling on the window-sill for airing a mass of pillows, sheets, and blankets that she was removing from an invisible bed inside. She could not have been more than sixteen years old, and, to all appearances at that distance, seemed to be one of those sturdy peasant girls, often not unattractive and great workers all, who take positions with poorish families in Rome and do everything from the cooking to taking the children to walk. This girl was beating and shaking the bedclothes with all her might, her efforts bringing the red to her face and her hair down over her forehead. Finally she finished her work, and in turning showed an attractive profile and the outline of a grown woman's breast. She straightened her hair, gave one or two more blows with her beater for good measure, and finally disappeared inside her house.

"Not bad, eh?" said Stefano, with a playful nudge of his elbow into Carlino's side. "Know her?"

"No, I don't," said the boy indifferently. He was feeling a strange impulse to confide to Stefano the remarkable story of his adventure in love. As he looked at him, however, he could not decide just how to go about it. Finally he blurted out:

"Signor Davico, know where I spent last night?"

Stefano turned and looked at him. "Well?"

"At your sister's."

"At my sister's?" Stefano repeated slowly. "What on earth were you doing at my sister's?"

"Your sister and I are lovers," said Carlino, trembling. "I have been seeing her every day for a month past."

Stefano's first impulse was not to believe. But there was the blushing excitement on the boy's face—and Stefano suddenly remembered Maria Luisa's strange departure from the room on the night of her visit! He realized that Carlino was telling the truth.

He had a flash of envious anger. When the conduct of other people meant nothing to Stefano in terms of utility, or affected him in no other way, he was usually left indifferent. But just then his rancour against his sister was too strong. His rage flared high and violent. He was tempted to reply: "So you are carrying on with her? You must have a good appetite!"

But another thought came to him, cold, rational, profound, and it served to check an outburst that would have been sincere but certainly profitless and inopportune. Such an adventure on the part of his sister might, possibly, be turned to good account, if he could keep an eye on it. At worst, he could use it to obtain a real vengeance for the rebuff she had given him. At best, he could oblige her, without scenes and complicated negotiations—just with a significant allusion or two—to do what he wanted. Maria Luisa had dropped all plans for a divorce, probably. She would therefore prefer silence, however costly, to any public revelation of her relations with such a boy.

Pleased with the neatness of his calculation, rapid as it had been, since it seemed to offer a loophole of escape from his painful situation, Stefano thought rapidly on. His best policy should be to meet Carlino with a flattering, admiring response, speaking as one man to another. In that way he could win the trustful confidence of the youth and so obtain, as need required, any information that would serve his purposes.

He therefore smiled a broad smile, raised a hand, and brought it down with a vigorous, good-humoured slap on the boy's shoulder.

"Oh, now I see!" he cried. "Now I see what Maria Luisa was up to that day when she went into your room and stayed so long. She knew what she was about! And I, like a fool, didn't! And what a sly fellow you are, too! Not a word out of you, no, sir! Little angel face, eh? Go and tell me you can trust people after that, even when they're hardly out of knee-pants! And now I see why you were always too sleepy and tired afternoons to take me out! Books, I said! Working him too hard at school! And all the while, you—!" At that point he gave a loud guffaw with an expressive gesture. "Well, Carlino, my boy, what can I say? Congratulations!"

Carlino took Stefano's boisterous praise far otherwise than he had taken his father's insipid condonance. Whether because he regarded the invalid as an authority in such matters, or because he sensed in it the very element of flattering camaraderie which Stefano had tried to pack into it, he could feel his soul swelling with an excited, almost intoxicated pride and satisfaction. His eyes gleamed with joy, and he could hardly restrain an impulse to throw his arms about Stefano's neck and kiss him first on one cheek and then on the other.

"Perhaps I was wrong in telling you," he ventured, hesitating, "but I thought you were one of the few people who would be likely to understand."

Stefano nodded, approvingly.

"You're right," he said, lying glibly. "Besides, I am her brother, and I should have known about it if you hadn't said a word. Maria Luisa herself would probably have come and told me." He paused for a moment; then, approaching the window again, he drummed with the tips of his fingers on a pane. "Anyway, I am glad, mighty glad!" he added, in a protecting, conscientious tone. "I have plenty of reasons to be angry at my sister, but I've got to say that she is one of the few women I could wish anybody to have as a mistress. . . . There is no doubt about it," he continued, looking out of the window, "she's a lady through and through, and with no end of good points. A boy like you can learn a lot from her. She's intelligent, she knows the world. . . ."

"What I observe," said Carlino, his reverence and affection overflowing, "is her kindness of heart. She is a kind person. Nobody was ever as kind to me as she has been."

"And you're right there!" approved Stefano, thinking of his sister in exactly opposite terms. "Maria Luisa is certainly kind—kindness itself. But one thing, Carlino"—he lowered his voice, as though about to impart a very intimate counsel; his fingers were drumming on the windowpane again—"I should advise you not to breathe a word of all this to any other person. Oh, of course—it's all right with me—I'm her brother. But if you were to tell anybody else, Maria Luisa would have every right to think you were a cad. Now there's nobody a woman is less willing to forgive than a man who tells."

A sudden blush flamed on the boy's face, and he was about to confess in shame that he had already told his father. But he restrained himself, and, perhaps in order to show his gratitude for the encouragement and advice he had been receiving, or perhaps because he thought it wiser to change the subject, he volunteered, without reflecting:

"You are right, Signor Davico. I really never intended to tell anybody, and it was just by pure chance that I thought of telling you. Really, what I wanted to say was that I have learned Andreina's address. It's number 9 Lungotevere dei Gracchi."

He saw the invalid's fingers cease their drumming on the windowpane, and the man's head turn slowly in his direction, staring at him out of glassy eyes.

"Lungotevere dei Gracchi," repeated Stefano, with a strangely loud, cavernous voice. "What did you say the number was?"

"Number nine," repeated Carlino, half afraid. A vague sense of having again done wrong had come over him. For reasons best known to herself, Valentina had all along been refusing to give Andreina's address to Stefano. Now he, Carlino, had blurted it out! But he remembered that the professor ascribed Valentina's hostility to the invalid to an affection which Stefano was failing to requite, so that, after all, her secretiveness might be based on a mere feeling of jealousy for a more attractive sister. In that case, the mistake he had made could not be a very serious one, nor lead to any particular consequences.

"Don't tell Valentina I told you," he cautioned, nevertheless. "She never was willing that you should have it."

"Why should I tell her?" Stefano answered, with a half-snicker.

But now a surprising change had come over him. Buoyant, almost agile, he made his way to the sofa, tossed his crutches aside, and lay down. Then he picked up the guitar, and after striking a few chords, began to thrum an old French song. The instrument was a ramshackle affair, with one string missing, and the invalid was not a skilful player to begin with. But he was in such a triumphant mood that this time such deficiencies counted for little. The same intensity of feeling was apparent both in his voice and in the music he drew from the strings. As he played, a savage joy seemed to overflow from each of the notes that he extracted by main force from the ragged instrument. He beat time with movements of his head, turning a fat inspired face towards the ceiling, and lifting his voice to a shrill, powerful, almost unchaste fullness.

Carlino stood watching him from the window, and the invalid's demeanour, his manner of singing and playing, the expression on his face, somehow made shivers run up and down the boy's spine. He realized instinctively that the things he had just revealed had somehow contributed to that mood of bestial joy and that under it, also, something vindictive, something dangerous, lay. A feeling of repentance and a vague dread took possession of him.

Some moments passed that way, Stefano singing and thrumming, and now and again lowering his eyes from the ceiling to sweep Carlino with a sleepy, self-satisfied gaze that seemed to say: "What a voice, eh, when I am in form!" It was clear that he was deeply stirred by his own artistic efforts.

Then the door suddenly opened, and Valentina entered.

She was carrying a roll of cotton-wool, a little bottle, and an oblong pasteboard box. Still angry, still frowning, she shut the door with her free hand and stepped over to the sofa. Stefano ceased singing, scratched three or four concluding chords as if in challenge from his guitar, and then tossed the instrument aside. It fell to the floor with the thud of a broken drum. Looking up at the girl he cried:

"Valentina, life is beautiful—I defy anybody to prove to me that it isn't!"

Carlino's sister made no reply to such exuberant optimism. She set her things on the stand near the sofa, drew a syringe from the oblong box, and examined the point against the light from the window.

"What has happened to you?" she finally remarked, still studying the syringe. "Ten minutes ago you were whining and whimpering."

"You would make anyone whine and whimper," Stefano replied gaily. "But life, no! Not life! Life never goes back on men like me!"

"Unfortunately!" commented Valentina. From the same oblong box she had now drawn a glass ampule that contained a thick, colourless liquid. She cut the sealed stopper with a little saw. "But now instead of talking so much, suppose you get yourself ready." She spoke in the cool, indifferent manner of the professional nurse. "You help him, Carlino," she added. "Then I can attend to all these things."

The boy leapt forward from the window to the patient's side. Puffing, struggling to lift himself to his elbows, Stefano unbuttoned his suspenders and Carlino pulled his trousers and drawers down over his legs, leaving him naked from the waist down. The patient rolled over, exposing his right buttock to the point of the needle.

Carlino had many times assisted at that same operation, but that day, for the first time, he was disagreeably and unaccountably impressed by the contrast between the man's florid and healthy appearance and his mysterious inability to stand on his feet or move his legs—the sole symptom of the malady that was destroying him. No disease was apparent in those muscular legs, those hairy, virile, robust thighs. But the patient had only to move or try to change his position to give one, suddenly, the impression of something flaccid, disabled, crippled, invertebrate.

Recoiling before his own repugnance, Carlino saw his sister bend over, knit her eyes, feel the man's broad pale skin for the right spot, and then with a resolute thrust send the point of the needle deep into the muscle.

"Oh, oh!" cried the invalid, laughing between grated teeth, and grasping at the pillows on his sofa. "It's just our luck, Valentina! Whatever the pretext, you always give me a pain."

This time again the girl failed to reply. Her work done, she straightened up, very much on her dignity, and began to set her things in order.

"Valentina," the man resumed, good-humouredly, pulling at his clothes and sitting up, "I suggest we strike a bargain. I won't pester you for that address any more. In return you do something for me!"

Carlino thought that his sister's face brightened as with a hope at those words.

"What am I to do?" she asked.

"In an apartment on a lower floor over opposite, with the Muccis, I believe, there's a dream of a maid who does their cleaning every day. About sixteen, I should say, and her specialty, bosom! Bosom for bosom, there's nothing to match her on the street! Well, introduce me to her, and we'll say no more about that other person, word of honour."

It was clear that he was making the proposal more to tease Valentina than in hopes of winning his point, though, perhaps, on a day of so many decisive triumphs, his self-assurance may have led him even to believe that one more miracle might be possible. But the girl was a simple soul and had no sense of irony. She was conscious only of the offensiveness of his remarks. She replied belligerently, facing him with her hands on her hips:

"You had better go and suggest that bargain to some other woman—your sister, perhaps! Do you know that if you were not the sick man you are, I would give you a horse-whipping?"

The invalid smiled contemptuously.

"Now, say, Valentina, don't be inconsiderate! What did I ask of you? Just an introduction—nothing more! I'll admit that if you were to arrange for more, I would be the last to complain. But I didn't ask it of you."

Valentina seemed to stand appalled before such cold impiousness. She shook her head in significant menace, as she gathered up her things from the stand.

"I think I had better not say anything. I'm only sorry that Carlino has to be here to listen to such talk. Anyway, I don't need to attend to you. There's a God for that, and though He stands for a great deal, there are things that He never has. He has sent you this disease as a first warning. If you go on and fail to change your attitude, you'll be getting worse."

"Burn the false prophet!" cried Stefano gaily. "Say, hand me my guitar!"

Valentina's threats could still be heard from the corridor. Carlino picked up the instrument and gave it to the invalid. Then he put the two crutches together and stood them against the chair. Stefano struck a few chords on the strings. Then he raised his voice in a song again. Taking advantage of the man's absorption in his music, Carlino murmured a good-day and slipped from the room.

IV

"Now let's get to Maria Luisa's!" he thought with relief, as he reached the spiral stairway, and began to descend, two steps at a time. The shaft was pregnant with smells from all the Sunday dinners that were being prepared in the various apartments in the building. "A mixed fry there," he murmured, as he turned a landing, "and there it's roast, and there a stew." In the long halls, like his own, behind the black outside doors, he could hear children running and screaming, free from school tasks and bored by the long forenoon. The stairway itself, despite its grey paint and its dusty half-light, betrayed with many symptoms that the hour was late and the day a holiday. Smoky bursts of sunlight pierced the big windows and lost their way in the winding shaft. From one of the apartments came a song, sung in a stentorian voice, and it took Carlino a second to determine that it was produced not by a man but by a gramophone. On the lowest landing but one he came upon a red carnation with the stem broken short. He picked it up and thrust it into his buttonhole. All those smells, sounds, suggestions of the day of rest somehow dispelled the doubts and shocks that the morning at home had brought him.

He reached the street. Just outside the entranceway he almost encountered the maid and Maddalena, his little sister, both of them laden with packages from a shopping expedition. The child was pressing against her chest a large bundle wrapped in yellow paper. She had on her best Sunday clothes—a little rose-coloured velvet coat, long white woollen stockings, patent-leather shoes. Around her neck was a huge outswelling collar of a white curly moufflon, and on her head sat a little hat, in the 1830 style, of the same material as the coat, but ornamented with blue ribbons and flowers. They were both busy trying to keep their packages from falling and did not notice Carlino. He hurried on, then stopped and looked back at them. The little girl's holiday attire contrasted strangely with the wrapping on her bundle and with the humble garments of the maid. Hanging on the latter's arm was a big reddish bunch of vegetables. She was in a hurry and kept scolding the child, whom she was dragging along by an arm. They walked on into the entranceway and disappeared. "Why are they marketing so late?" Carlino couid not help asking himself. He concluded that they had probably been to church, and was satisfied.

It was almost noon. Already the clear morning air had thickened and a white stationary blanket of cloud was beginning to dim the sky. At points where, ten minutes before, the sun had managed to get through with somewhat foggy bursts of light, there were now brightish spots around which the clouds seemed deceptively thinner. Soon that warm midday glow would itself disappear and the afternoon would be as opaque and depressing as the other days of that cloudy winter.

The sidewalks were crowded with people, and the drives with automobiles. To either hand were well-constructed buildings and gardens with green trees. But all their brilliancy failed under that glum disenchanted light that took away all contrasts of white and black and attenuated all movements. The passersby looked like so many beggars, the racing-cars like so many lagging, badly painted, ridiculously shaped carts, the buildings like flat assemblages of cornices, columns, and insipid business signs, and gardens that would have been a delight under a radiant sun became melancholy splashes of drooping green.

But for Carlino it was as if the sun were shining, everything were new and fresh, and he were looking at the world for the first time. He had an extraordinary capacity for surprise and admiration. He would stop for long waits in front of a show window, or turn to look at a woman, a vehicle, or anything else that attracted his interest. The after-effects of the night before had worn off. He felt stronger of muscle than ever and thought he could walk that way for hours and hours with the same enjoyment. He idled along from street to street with his hands in his pockets, looking at everything like a traveller just arrived from a distant land and certain already that he had reached the most beautiful city in the world.

He entered a bar and drank a glass of cordial. He discovered that he had eighty lire left of the hundred that Maria Luisa had forced him, with some coaxing, to accept the night before. He remembered that she liked flowers and decided forthwith to buy her a basket of roses. He found a shop a little farther along. The proprietor came forward to meet him from a dark, fragrant interior, lighted a showcase, and displayed within it all the roses he had to sell. There were two kinds only: red ones with small closely packed, opened petals, slender twisted stems, very thorny; then white ones, majestically erect, with long thick stems, few thorns and hard, rich petals, still in bud. "No," he thought, "they won't do. The red ones are ugly, and you can't send white ones to a lady." He looked doubtfully over the offerings of other flowers, the dealer excusing the poverty on grounds of the cold weather that had grievously interfered with the supply. His eye finally fell on a basket of gardenias. He remembered that Maria Luisa was particularly devoted to that flower, and usually wore them for her corsages. He ordered the basket wrapped up, paid for it, left the shop, and hailed a taxicab.

It seemed to him, as he rode along, that there was nothing left now—neither parental resistance nor obligations at school—to stand between him and Maria Luisa and prevent him from devoting himself wholly to the woman he loved. He did not think to ask where all that was going to lead. All that he foresaw was an endless period of bliss packed with new, delightful, unexpected enjoyments. He was no longer frightened at his future prospects. Having lost all hope of catching up at school, he was conscious of a sort of dizzy freedom, a complete passiveness before a dangerous and exciting adventure. Whenever he thought of Maria

Luisa, a complicated mixture of sentiments came over him, a blend of gratitude, awe, admiration, desire, jealous possession. He wished he could show the lady the true extent of the love she had inspired in him, and his ranging fancy sought out situations in which he could give concrete proofs of it. He imagined Maria Luisa sick and himself caring for her with indefatigable attention. He saw her house on fire and himself rushing through the flames to carry her to safety. He even saw her dead and himself following her funeral in public, weeping bitterly. He concluded that only this last disaster could supply the truly adequate opportunity for him to display to her soul, already in heaven, the real measure of his passion, since he would mourn her with such sorrow and such abiding loyalty that no doubt could be left as to the intensity of his feeling for her. He became so stirred at the mere thought of that exhilarating tragedy that he did not follow the route of the taxicab and found himself at the villa before he knew it.

He opened the gate with a key that Maria Luisa had given him, that he might enter unobserved whenever they were to meet, and hastily traversed the garden. He feared that she might have gone out until he was reassured by the presence of her car, which stood, bright and glossy, in front of the main door, between the flowerless flowerbeds and the naked and crumbling circuit wall. He opened the house door just as he had opened the gate. The vestibule was empty, and the doors of the dining-room and the kitchen closed. He went up the stairs two by two and stopped in the upper hall to catch his breath and take the wrapping off his basket of gardenias.

Softly, softly, standing there under the sifted glow from the skylight, he removed the paper from the flowers, smoothed it out, rolled it up, and put it into his pocket. Then he looked at his gift. The basket was gilded with gold leaf and had a handle that was wrapped round and round with a ribbon of white silk. The white fragrant blossoms were intertwined with a delicate dressing of musk and mistlike ferns. Maria Luisa, he thought, knew all about flowers and all about gifts. How pleased she would be with that one! He was also not a little satisfied with himself for the graceful, poetic solution he had found for the embarrassing and rather humiliating problem of the hundred lire. To have given them back would have been discourteous, to keep them dishonest; but these flowers would show Maria Luisa that he knew much more about the world than his age, and the poor circumstances of his family, might have allowed her to imagine.

With his head full of such thoughts, trembling with emotion, he stole to the door of the great drawing-room, opened it without knocking, and entered. Had the door been directly in front of the divan, which, with the chair and the gramophone, made up the entire furnishing of the room, he might perhaps have been in time to notice his mistake and retire unobserved. But as he entered, preoccupied with his basket, and otherwise self-conscious, he faced a bare wall. His plan was first to close the door in a matter-of-fact sort of way, then turn slowly around with a smile on his face and the basket in his hand, and advance towards Maria Luisa to offer his gift. And so he did. But when he finally got to look at the divan he discovered to his astonishment that Maria Luisa was not alone.

Seated in the chair with his back turned towards Carlino was a bald-headed man in a brown suit. Maria Luisa was in Chinese pyjamas with loose black trousers and a long jacket embroidered in colours. She was sitting on the divan, with her legs crossed and the cigarette-holder between her teeth, apparently listening to what the man was saying. At the sound of the opening door, the visitor broke off and looked around with a calm polite curiosity. Maria Luisa raised her eyes and was thunderstruck to see Carlino.

The man's small eyes, deep-sunken under a low forehead, his big nose, broad pale eyelids, and fleshless cheeks, were too faithful to descriptions that Maria Luisa had given Carlino for the boy not to understand at once that that was her husband Matteo. Had he failed in the identification, however, Maria Luisa's blanched face would have been enough to make him aware of the fatal error he had committed. Paralysed, not knowing what to do or say, he stood silent where he was in the middle of the great empty room.

But the flowers that had been the principal cause of his undoing supplied Maria Luisa with the means of saving the day. She arose with a violent movement and advanced upon him.

"You're the florist's boy? How did you get in here? Wasn't the maid on the floor below? Besides, since when does one enter a room without knocking? And you got everything wrong—I ordered roses, not gardenias. Well, take them back—or rather, no—wait outside!"

That rain of sentences had been delivered in a loud angry tone of voice, and meanwhile Maria Luisa was pushing the boy out of the room. Before he could understand just how it all had come about, Carlino found himself, with his basket still in his hands, standing in the hall in front of the closed door of the drawing-room.

The silence there, and the soft light, enabled him to reassemble his thoughts. "Well, no great harm has come of it!" he reflected. "With her wits about her, as always, Maria Luisa managed to get us out of it!" He concluded, however, that it would be wiser not to wait just there, since the husband, on leaving, would surely pass that way. He ought to wait for his mistress in some other room. But where? He decided that the safest place would probably be her bedroom.

Maria Luisa must have risen a few moments before. The curtains were still down, and what light there was came indirectly through the open door of the bathroom, where Carlino could see a stretch of cold white-tiled wall and a heavy rectangular tub still full of blue steaming water. In the room itself the bed was still unmade. Some of the covers were lying on the floor, a breakfast tray with empty dishes was resting on a pillow, the bed-rug had been pushed into the middle of the floor. Not a toilet article was in its proper place.

Carlino sat gingerly down on the edge of the bed and for lack of anything better to do began to smell of his gardenias. He did not have to wait very long. Five minutes had not passed before the door into the drawing-room opened and Maria Luisa appeared.

Overflowing with admiration, Carlino thought that he ought to let her know the very first thing how thoroughly he appreciated her quickness of wit.

"That was Matteo, wasn't it?" he began, smiling. "I recognized him. But you certainly had your wits about you! . . ."

But as he talked he noticed in the woman's eyes and on her face a hard, half-frenzied expression. Alarmed, he lost his smile and broke off.

"I had my wits about me all right," she answered, advancing upon him. "But you will be so good as to go home at once and never show your face in here again! . . . Whom are those flowers for?" she added, snatching the basket from his hand and surveying him. "For me? Well, see what I do with them!" She thrust a hand in among the gardenias, tore them loose from their dressing of green and began tossing them about the room. They fell on the bed and on the floor. One struck Carlino in the face. After the flowers, it was the turn of the basket, which the enraged woman threw to the floor, finally giving it a kick that sent it flying through the door into the bathroom. "That's what I do with your flowers!" she summarized, catching her breath. "Now make yourself scarce—do you hear me? This minute!"

Too dazed to be hurt, Carlino stood looking at his gardenias, which the sudden and unexpected tornado had sprinkled over the bed and floor; then he looked at Maria Luisa, who was pacing up and down over that scene of ruin, her hands thrust into the pockets of her black pyjamas, her nostrils dilated, her eyes ablaze with wrath. As he gradually realized what had happened, a great unbearable grief came over him. So—for that silly piece of business he was to lose the woman he loved, and with her his one reason for living! The thought filled his soul with misery, his eyes began to swim and great tears to trickle down his cheeks.

"But, Maria Luisa," he finally managed to say, lifting a pale, desperate, unseeing face in her direction, "I didn't mean any harm. If I had known——"

She interrupted him:

"How in the world were you brought up?" She halted her furious promenade and looked at him. "Who taught you to enter a room without knocking? Who told you to come here this morning? Who told you to come here without an invitation from me? Don't sit there like an idiot—answer! Who told you? Yes—nobody! Nobody told you! How on earth then did you dare . . . ?" Her ordinarily hoarse voice had grown shrill and strident. She shook her clenched fist over the boy's lowered head, then began wringing her hands and storming about the room again. "Matteo must have caught everything at a glance—he's no fool! And, you see—he left immediately! He understood, and left immediately! . . ."

Carlino's ears were buzzing. As he sat there with his face lowered, hot tears dropped from his eyes and wet his hands. Mentally he was going back over the whole story of his love, his happy excited race that morning down the winding stairs, his walk along the streets towards an uncertain but splendid future, the purchase of the gardenias in the store, Maria Luisa sitting in her fur coat on the bed in his bedroom at home and their first kiss, Maria Luisa stretched on the divan in the great empty drawing-room at the time of his first visit. . . . Memories of happy days now lost in the far distance, unrecoverable! Now all that was over! He could only go home, turn to his books again, resume the petty routine of school!

These pitiless reflections held him motionless in his seat on the bed, insensible, as it were in a trance. When he looked up he saw that Maria Luisa was sitting at her dressing-table, one leg over the other. She was puffing furiously at a cigarette. Though she sat quite motionless, it was apparent that she was still frenziedly angry. He looked at her, and—he could not have told why—just then, as had happened early that morning when he had stood gazing at her sleeping form, a great passion flooded him, and an uncontrollable desire to let her know that, in spite of this cruel banishment, he still loved her and would never cease to love her, and that his gratitude, whatever the future might hold for them, would be unalterable and inextinguishable. He thought that to express that impulse of limitless dedication would be to vanquish the less worthy part of himself and to conclude this first, and probably last, passion of his life with the same intensity with which it had begun.

But when he set out to put his feelings into words, he found that he choked and could not speak. He could only shake his head and press his teeth into his lower lip. He rose mechanically and walked to the window.

He stood there for a time with his forehead pressed in shame against the windowpane. He could feel the tears slowly form, then burn their way past his lowered eyelids, and finally, with an ironical leap to freedom, dart down over his cheeks and lips. He stopped one with the end of his tongue. It had a bitter, salty taste.

Finally he turned around, facing the room, and he spoke straight ahead of him, like a blind man addressing someone who is not where he thinks he is:

"Very well! I shall go away!" But then, in order to give some faint idea of his devotion: "If that is what you want, I shall do it gladly."

He felt that he had expressed himself very awkwardly. He paused, blushed, and then started for the door.

Having vented her first attack of anger, Maria Luisa had begun to think. She was not in the remotest degree in love with the boy. His background at home, and the fact that he was Andreina's brother, gave her no end of disquieting and unflattering impressions regarding him, all the way from a feeling that she had stooped far below her station, to an actual fear of being exploited or even robbed. There could be no doubt, either, that the youth moved awkwardly and thoughtlessly inside his new situation. As had happened that day, one could never be sure what he might do next. At any moment he might damage her at a point of vital interest.

But if considerations of that sort counselled a break with him, there were others quite as important that made it desirable for her to go on. Matteo was playing a double game. He was pleading with her to go back to him, but he was not letting a day pass without seeing Andreina. To let Carlino go under those circumstances would be to throw away her best weapon of defence and offence and put herself at her husband's mercy. Though not in love—imagine!—she could not fail to be conscious of a number of attractive aspects to her adventure. She liked the boy's extreme youth, his obedient, devoted attachment, the dazzled admiration he paid her—in general all those ways and words that were proper to his tender years and inexperience. Maria Luisa found all that novel, and she was not far from imagining that she must have been the first woman in the world to discover such things. Really she was drifting unconsciously down a road that many mature strong-willed women eventually hit upon. She was telling herself that, once she were reconciled with her husband and rid of Carlino, she would find some other cavalier of his age, a youth, perhaps, of her own social class, with whom she would find a way to make up for much lost time. "Matteo will not make a fool of me again!" she vowed to herself. "I shall have gained that much, if nothing more, from all this stupid business!" Meanwhile she thought that she ought to talk to the boy and somehow balm the raw hurt that she had given him during that first outburst of temper.

She was at that point in her meditation when she saw him mutter a few incomprehensible words, walk in front of her, and head for the door.

"Now what are you doing!" she could not help exclaiming. "Where are you going now?"

Carlino turned part way around.

"Didn't you tell me to go home?" he began.

"Why, no, why, no!" she returned, irritated. "You are all alike! One has to tell you a thing a hundred times. You can stay, but let's hope that what has just happened will be a lesson to you for the future. You've got to remember," she continued, dropping back into her angry tone, "that you are not the only person in my life, and that you have to act with some discretion. You should have seen that it was not the proper thing to do to come bursting in here last night. And so again today! At the very least, having come, you should not have rushed into a room without knocking, or without finding out from Rosa whether I was free. Those are the most elementary rules of tact and good manners. Anyone who does not respect them will not get very far in life!" Her disgust with the situation flashed across her mind again. She bruised out the fire in her cigarette in the ashtray. "Just consider! People are not alone in the world. One has to think of others. This time I have tried to explain to you. On another occasion I should feel I were wasting my breath, and send you away without bothering any further."

There was a moment's silence.

"So then?" asked Carlino, finally. He had listened to the woman's lecture with lowered head, grasping of it all, in his abashed confusion, only the point that was of life and death importance to him. "So then—I can stay?"

His boyish, undisguised fixation amused Maria Luisa. She rose and stationed herself in front of him.

"You would have been sorry to leave me?" she asked. Carlino's passion, stimulating her vanity to some slight extent, otherwise aroused hardly more than a fatuous curiosity in her. However, she gave her voice the tender intonation that she judged appropriate to such situations. "Very, very sorry?"

Unable to speak, Carlino would have thrown himself at her feet and kissed them. He did not perceive the conventional falseness in her tone of voice, nor the unloving coldness in the hard eyes that looked at him. All that he was aware of was the boundless and undeserved clemency of the lady, and he was dazzled by it as though he were looking into the sun, or at some other very bright object. He did not answer. He lowered his head and nodded yes.

There was another silence.

"You love me very much?" Maria Luisa then pressed, not knowing really what next to say. She found the boy's adoration all but incomprehensible, and she was aware of the idleness of the curiosity it inspired in her. Yet she could not have denied that her vanity was flattered. "After all," she thought, "it is not unpleasant to be loved like that. In the end it might become tiresome, but so long as one finds it amusing . . ."

"Very, very much?" she repeated, in her tone of affected tenderness. And she raised a hand and stroked his cheek.

That was the caress she had given him the first time they met. Carlino remembered it and his soul flooded with emotion. He bent over, seized her hand, and covered it with kisses.

They stood there. Her face wearing a flattered, fatuous expression, Maria Luisa looked down upon the boy's lowered head with a certain snobbish complacency. Though she kept turning her hand over and over that he might kiss it everywhere, she was still uncertain as to the real nature of the pleasure such extraordinary devotion gave her. At last she drew her hand away and said with a sort of haughtiness:

"Well, if you want to, you can stay. But I warn you, I haven't much time. Now I must hurry and take a bath. After that I have a luncheon engagement. . . . If you wish," she added, and she was conscious of a certain excitement that she could not have analysed, "you might make yourself useful. Rosa is busy. You might take her place. But could you?"

"What would I have to do?" asked Carlino, astonished.

"Well—help me with my bath and to dress. But no, I doubt if you could do it. I had better call Rosa."

"Why?" cried Carlino, his vanity pricked. "Try me at something. You'll see—I'll do it better than Rosa!"

"Suppose you begin by picking up these gardenias and putting them in a vase." She gave the order in a hard, impatient voice, then turned on her heel and disappeared into the bathroom.

Left alone, Carlino stood still a moment, with his eyes on the floor. He felt as though he had returned to a tranquil, ample breath of life after a lightning-like descent into darkness and annihilation. A few words of Maria Luisa had been enough to plunge him into despair, and a few others to restore him to happiness. She was truly his mistress, he thought. She could do with him what she wished! Never had any man been so submissive and humble before the woman he loved. With anyone else he would have found such subordination irksome. In the case of Maria Luisa it was a joy, as the outward sign of a love such as his for her, a love made up of devotion and of limitless gratitude. Take Rosa's place? He stood ready to do anything that she saw fit to ask of him! He would clean her shoes, sweep her rooms, make her bed, perform the most menial services, yielding to her with the same enchanted docility with which he responded to her more delightful and legitimate requirements as a tyrant in love. Happy, diligent, thrilling with his sentiments of exalted devotion, he went about the room, gathering up his poor flowers that lay strewn on the floor. On the dressing-table he found a vase of withering carnations. He threw them into the waste basket and replaced them with his gardenias, carefully freeing the stems of their silvery wrapping of tinfoil.

Meanwhile, from the bathroom came the sound of a faucet, running, and then of bare feet scampering over the mats on the floor. Soon he could hear water splashing over the tub and wetting the tiles.

"Carlino!" came a call, in the impatient, imperious tone that he had learned to know and to love.

He unwrapped the stem of the last gardenia, put it into its place in the vase, and then hurried obediently whither he had been called.

V

THOUGH their relations had lasted a month and Pietro had made it a habit to call on Andreina every night at very late hours after finishing his work at the paper, he had but rarely slept in her house, since she was afraid of a surprise by Matteo, and the few times he had done so she had awakened him at dawn and sent him off to complete his slumbers in his own room at the hotel. But that day he awoke gently and naturally of his own accord from a sleep that he considered unusually long and restful, and after lying for a time looking into the dark with open eyes, he decided to turn on the light on the nightstand. He made, forthwith, two astonishing discoveries. First, Andreina's place at his side was vacant, and she was nowhere to be seen. Secondly, instead of pointing to the usual six or seven in the morning, the hands on the alarm clock showed two in the afternoon.

He was certainly grateful for a good night's rest after a month of inadequate and interrupted sleeping, and he would probably have attached little importance to his late rising had he not suddenly remembered, as he sat up on the bed with his bare feet on the floor, that he had been invited to luncheon at the Tanzillos' that day. That thought brushed every trace of slumber from his still sluggish brain, and enabled him to see everything with absolute clearness. "Damn it, damn it, damn it!" he repeated time after time, rubbing his forehead and looking around the room. "And what can I do about it?" He would not have admitted as much, but what distressed him most in that irritating little oversight was not the fact that he was missing luncheon at the Tanzillos', but the fact that, having destroyed the substance of his relationship with his fiancée by betraying her, he was now, by an act of carelessness, giving a blow to appearances which so far he had managed after a fashion to save."

He had long since observed that in proportion as his interest in Andreina grew, his engagement to Sofia had become emptier and emptier, and harder and harder to live up to. The vague affection that he had once thought he had for the young marchesa had been definitely replaced by a constant and annoying sense of remorse. But in the face of that distressing development he had resolved to be all the more scrupulous about those external attitudes and details of conduct that he thought appropriate to a devoted and faithful fiancée. That had been a makeshift, as he well realized, but he felt unable to give up Andreina, whom he really loved, nor could he draw out of a marriage that he thought it wise to go through with. He had therefore chosen the line of least resistance in a quandary so great, and decided to let things drift along. Time, he hoped, would eventually provide its own solution. Now, however, he had overtly, brutally, missed an appointment, and he could see that in the long run even appearances would be compromised in his relations to Sofia. Just as rivers finally reach the sea, so the situation with which he was struggling was reaching its predestined outcome, and much sooner than he had expected.

So he reasoned, as he sat there, in his bare feet, on the edge of the bed, with his chin resting in his two hands and his elbows on his knees. But then he remembered another thing. He remembered that he had expressly requested Andreina to have him wakened well in advance of noon, so that he would be sure not to miss the appointment with the Tanzillos. There could be no doubt about it! In her dislike for Sofia, Andreina had again played one of her grim, ironical tricks. "This cannot go on," he assured himself angrily. "This simply cannot go on!"

He had left his clothes in the bathroom the night before. He went in to dress, mulling over a thousand thoughts and worries as he applied himself to a slow and painstaking toilet. What had hurt and irritated him most during the month that had passed was not the torment of his much bruised conscience because of his dishonesty towards Sofia. It was the fact that in all that time he had acquired not the slightest prestige or authority over Andreina. She had not changed her pessimistic despondent view of their respective characters and relationships. He had not been able to help her to be happier as he had hoped he might. He could see, on the contrary, that he had actually strengthened her in her views by his double-dealing and his irresoluteness, and not a day had passed that she did not favour him with some new piece of sarcasm or self-complacent insolence. "Pimps and panderers who live on the earnings of prostitutes," he mused bitterly, as he stood before the mirror, trying to get the right set to his tie, "manage to get admiration and obedience from the women who support them. That is why those women give them all the money they earn and are grateful when they receive in return some condescending caress. They are satisfied with their men, and even proud of them, obeying them, never doubting their word, and pulling the hair of any rival who tries to lay hands on them. Now all I ask of Andreina is that she should have a little confidence in herself and in me. And how does she treat me? She would treat a thief and a murderer far better, that is certain. She laughs in my face. She jeers at me. She makes no secret of her belief that she can do with me every blessed thing she pleases. . . . Well, I have had enough of it. By fair means or foul I will force her to change her tune. . . . Yes, by fair means or foul."

Not that he had as yet decided what the fair means or the foul might be. But he had had a good sleep and was finding his mind unusually clear, and his physical condition more buoyant than ordinary. He felt capable of undertaking any arduous enterprise that promised to enable him to make a conquest of Andreina, rescue her from her intolerably unhappy life, and solve, incidentally, his own predicament.

Having finished dressing, he stepped out into the corridor, which was bright with that soft clean light that is peculiar to the early hours of the afternoon and seems to have been specially devised to invite repose and make the digestion of one's dinner easier. But Pietro had not eaten dinner. He was hardly out of bed. That particular cast of sunlight angered him for the reproach it seemed to carry. He walked along to the kitchen and pushed the door open.

That room was in perfect order, and no trace or smell of luncheon, if luncheon there had been, was left. Cecilia was sitting at the window with her blond head lowered intently over a stocking that she was trying to mend.

"So you are up, Signor Monatti! A good day to you!" She spoke in a quiet, half-mirthful tone, raising her head and looking at him.

Pietro pretended not to hear.

"Where is the signora?" he asked, from the doorway.

"She had lunch and then went out," answered the maid, picking up a wooden ball, dropping it into the toe of the stocking, and tapping it with her thimble. "Why? Didn't you see her?"

Pietro did not answer. He thought a moment and then asked:

"Didn't she leave word with you to wake me early this morning?"

Cecilia shook her head.

"No, she didn't! She told me to be careful not to waken you."

Pietro had learned what he wanted to know. He shut the kitchen door and went back along the hall again. The clock that stood on the wooden pyramid was pointing to half past two. "She did just that!" he said to himself, as he got into his overcoat. "She wanted me to over-sleep!" He put on his hat, walked across the garden and found himself on the river drive.

On the green pine-crested heights that closed the horizon beyond the river and the houses on the opposite shore, a low dark sky weighed, as though it were about to rain. But overhead, where the sun should have been shining, the clouds thinned out to allow a pale sluggish light to filter through. Stopping on the sidewalk for a moment to accustom his eyes to the out-of-doors, Pietro looked to right and left along the deserted drive, with its houses rising in lines as far as he could see, some of them white, others reddish, others yellowish, but all of them equally flat and uninteresting under that lean, chilly light. January had left not a blade of grass on the browned sward in the narrow garden that followed the drive, not a leaf on the naked branches of the linden trees. At other seasons of the year a thick vegetation hid the dikes and the other shore from view. Now through the tree trunks one could count the stones in the parapet along the river and the windows in the great square buildings over across. At that moment there were no passersby on the sidewalks nor loiterers on the benches that marked the outlines of the circular flowerbeds and grass-plots in the garden. The only person in sight was a woman in a dark fur coat, standing at the parapet with her back to the drive, and looking at the river.

From the fur coat, but more especially from the fact that she was without a hat, Pietro recognized Andreina. He was not surprised. He knew that she often took walks along that street at that hour of the day. However, he crossed the avenue and the narrow strip of garden and took up a post at her side, also bending over the parapet to look at the river. A matted, half-waterlogged tangle of briers and brush was passing at that moment in the rush of the yellow muddy stream. Andreina followed it with her eyes as it whirled from eddy to eddy, caught for a moment on a pier of the bridge, then made its way around and disappeared. She turned her face towards him, but without changing her position.

"So you are up!" she proffered, unsurprised.

That had been Cecilia's greeting, and Pietro found the identity significant.

"Yes, I am up, thank you!" he answered quietly, looking her in the eye. "But didn't I ask you to have me wakened before noon?"

Andreina looked at him crosswise without smiling. There was a glint of sarcasm in her tired, somewhat swollen eyes.

"Yes, but you were sleeping so sweetly it really seemed a pity to disturb you."

"But now I have missed my appointment with Sofia!" he exclaimed, resentfully. "I am sure you did it on purpose, just to disobey me and at the same time to spite that girl."

He saw her smile as she retorted with her cool impudence:

"If you know all about it without my telling you, why do you ask?" She spoke in a low voice, drawing her head more cosily into the collar of her fur coat, and averting her eyes.

"What I want to know is why you did it," he answered. "I have repeated time and again that so long as I am engaged to Sofia I am going to live up to appearances."

"Are you afraid she'll break the engagement?" asked Andreina readily enough. "Don't worry! Sofia will marry you whatever you do to her."

What angered Pietro was the contempt he thought he could detect in her tone. He answered with heat:

"So you still think that all I am interested in is money and so on? Well, you are mistaken. It's not a question here of her breaking or not breaking the engagement—I would be glad enough if she did. But it is a question of good manners. It is true that I am betraying Sofia, but so long as we are engaged I do not want her to have any reason to complain of me."

Andreina looked at him steadily for a moment, with a sort of deliberate complacency that was peculiar to her. Then she began to laugh, as she said, slowly:

"You expect the good manners you refer to to bring home a very fat side of bacon, to say nothing of the social position. Do you want me to tell you what you are? You are a hypocrite, and poor at the game, at that. At least you shouldn't try to play it with me, because you do not fool me one bit. I see through everything you say, and I know just why you say it."

"So you don't believe me?" he asked.

"How could I?" she answered quietly. "You expect too much. You want to feather your nest and at the same time pass for a sort of saint."

For a moment Pietro stood looking dreamily down at the river below him. First came a bright livid mass of swollen water flowing lazily along, then a section of bank, rough with holes and protuberances and nourishing a bit of famished winter grass, finally, closing his view, the white lines of stones in the granite wall, with dark stripes marking spots of long-standing damp. "So, it has all been useless!" he thought, and he could not help shaking his head in bitter disappointment. His love for Andreina had done her no good. In fact it seemed only to have strengthened her in her ruinous convictions. But he still believed that he was the only person in the world who knew her and her needs thoroughly, and that therefore he ought to make one last effort to restore his authority and persuade her that he was right. He turned towards her again.

"But don't you see that your way of looking at things is vulgar as well as false? Don't you see that in the long run it will lead to your ruin?"

"To my ruin!" she repeated, with her desperate coldness, looking at him sidewise over the collar of her coat, and smiling a convulsive sort of smile. "Well, I hope it does!"

There was so much bitterness in her remark that Pietro could not help feeling stirred.

"But, Andreina," he begged, warmly, "why don't you try to see things the way I do? You know that I understand you really, and that I know what you need."

She looked at him again over the fur collar.

"What is your idea of what I need?"

"You ought to change your whole way of looking at things and therefore be happier. You ought to believe in me and in yourself."

She shook her head positively.

"You are completely wrong. You do not know me at all. What I did need was to marry Matteo, become rich and independent of other people. I did not succeed. So I have lost faith in myself, or rather faith in my chances of obtaining things of that kind. As regards yourself, you have no reason to complain. I have the greatest confidence in your abilities."

"So you see?" cried Pietro, hopefully. "Why don't you listen to me then?"

Andreina seemed not to have heard. She ran on with the same icy tranquillity:

"Yes, I am certain that your ideas and methods are much sounder than mine, and that you will succeed in getting the best of everybody you meet in your life—of Sofia, Matteo, me, and the many others I don't happen to know. I think you will always get what you want. Does that satisfy you?"

A cold lucid resentment took possession of Pietro. He looked rapidly to right and left along the drive and saw that it was deserted. Then he turned towards the woman again.

"So you won't believe me by fair means! Perhaps then you will believe me by foul!" And he seized her by an arm and forced her upright.

"What do you mean?"

"This is what I mean!" And he threw out his arm and gave her a slap on the face as hard as he could.

Andreina turned pale, then flaming red, and her eyes grew large and bright from her complete and horrified astonishment.

"Now will you believe me?" he asked, in a low panting whisper, bringing his face close to hers. She drew back, meeting his gaze, but shaking her head. "Well, here is another one, then." And he slapped her in the same way on the other cheek.

The second blow seemed to have much less effect than the first. She looked at him. Then suddenly a hurt but resolute dignity drove the expression of surprise and horror from her face.

"You are contemptible!" she said, simply, speaking through her teeth.

Then she turned on her heel and at a leisurely pace, as though she were certain of not being detained or followed, she walked off along the garden towards her house. Pietro remained as he was, leaning against the parapet with his back to the river. He watched her figure recede among the linden trees. Time and again he was tempted to call to her and beckon to her to stop. But his lips did not open, and his hand hung inert at his side. She crossed the drive, opened the gate into her garden, and disappeared.

VI

PIETRO stood there, his back to the parapet, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his overcoat. Ashamed to confess it to himself, he none the less hoped that the gate of the little garden would open again to allow Andreina to reappear on the sidewalk, or that she would at least come to one of the windows and beckon him to her. Was it not absurd that two people who really loved each other should separate like that, after two cuffs and a "You are contemptible!"? But the gate did not open, and no one of the yellow curtains rose in Andreina's room. Some minutes of bootless waiting passed. Pietro felt as though he were suffocating. He shook his head violently, pinched his cheeks between the thumb and fingers of each hand, and looked around.

An old-fashioned public carriage, open, and drawn by a white horse, was coming down the drive. In it were a man, a woman, and a little girl. It rolled along at a leisurely Sunday pace, slowed down as it approached Andreina's place, and finally halted directly in front of her gate. The man got out. From the cut of his beard, the short green overcoat that dangled, bell-shaped, about his skinny thighs, and the fussy way in which he brought his short-sighted eyes close up to the meter to read the fare, Pietro identified Professor Renato Malacrida. After that it was not hard to guess that the woman was Valentina, and Maddalena, the little girl. A family visit, in a word, and perhaps a peace-making! At any rate, an affair for the rest of the afternoon! He would have no chance that day to get into the house again and win Andreina's forgiveness with a rain of caresses and a flood of words! Bored, prey to a keen, piercing distress, he saw the three visitors re-form their ranks on the sidewalk, then disappear one by one through the opened gate.

"They are in for a pretty reception!" he remarked to himself, noting also that the thought gave him no relief whatever. Meanwhile the driver had picked up his reins and whip, and was steering his lean, awkward horse, absurd with its long shanks and the enormous blinders on its eyes, into a wide turn that would head the carriage in the other direction on Pietro's side of the avenue. Pietro waited till the turn was completed, then he called.

"Where to?" asked the driver, turning down the little flag on the meter.

Pietro still had a lingering hope, absurd as it was, that Andreina might appear at a window and wave to him. He halted, therefore, with one hand on the box, the other on the down-turned cover, and his foot on the step, and gazed for a moment at Andreina's house.

"To the Grand Hotel!" he finally answered, climbing in, and dropping upon the leather-cushioned seat.

The carriage drove away at a trot.

The sharp knife-like anguish that had attacked Pietro on Andreina's departure gave no signs of abatement. Like certain physical pains that one knows will not rise to a paroxysm nor diminish to a dull ache, but seem destined to endure to all eternity in their fixed rhythm, while their sheer monotony bids fair to drive one mad, so Pietro had the impression that his inner distress had crystallized into a definite form that was beyond all help and beyond any limit of time. "You are contemptible!" Simple words, but so complicated in their potential implications! If they had been just a momentary, and for that matter well-justified, reaction to a physical attack, well and good! There was no anger of that kind that could not be cajoled with a little goodwill and retransformed into love. But supposing—and one had to admit that there were grounds for supposing—that those three words had meant: "We have seen each other for the last time," what would happen?

So great was the agitation this question brought upon him, and so great his repugnance to facing the only answer he seemed able to give it, that he really preferred to postpone consideration of it to a time when his pain should be less acute. Yes, he should think of something else!

He tried to interest himself in what he could see along the streets he was traversing, only to find that his eyes saw nothing, so completely did his intolerable pain fill his mind. He tried to guess the kinds of pavement the carriage was traversing by the noises emitted by the wheels. But that diversion also failed—the only noise he could hear was: "You are contemptible!" His discomfort, in fact, was so strong and so obsessing that he gave up trying to master it and could only gaze on it in wonder. "So then," he concluded in utter stupor, "I love her so much that I cannot live without her?"

It was not a discovery, exactly. He had known that he loved Andreina the very first time they met. What he had not perceived was the true nature of his love, since he had allowed himself, among other compromises, to continue his relations with Sofia and even to think of marrying her. Now that the prospect of a separation from Andreina seemed almost to be driving him mad, he thought that he was really discovering for the first time the earnest, far-reaching character of his love for the girl. It was an exacting love, he reflected, a love that was not satisfied with kisses, caresses, and other feminine favours, but was fraught with active and pitying comprehension, and insisted on influencing Andreina's character and her outlook on life.

But if he were to influence her, he had to clear her head of the destructive notion that he was just an ambitious hypocrite and schemer. And how do that? Not surely by words and lectures! They cost nothing! Anybody could manufacture them! Nor even by beatings, granted that they hurt him more than they did her! The two well-intentioned slaps he had given her showed his impotence and rage rather than his sereneness and strength of character. With facts, then—hard facts! But what facts? Pietro concluded that, at the point things had then reached, the only way for him to prove his unselfishness and his love would be to break his engagement and marry Andreina instead of Sofia.

The idea had hardly come to him when he heard his name called: "Pietro! Pietro!" He thought he recognized the voice that cried in a tone of mingled impatience and happy surprise.

At that moment his carriage was going along a street parallel to the river. Like a deep narrow ditch it lay some distance below the level of the parapet, with a row of tall ancient buildings on one side, and on the other an artificial mound of rocks, so arranged as to simulate a natural roll in the ground. It was covered with palms, laurels, aloes, and other evergreen plants, and supported, above, a continuation of the gardens that flanked the river. Pietro looked at the sidewalks to right and left, but saw only a few pedestrians, a shopkeeper or two sitting at the doors of their shops, and at the next corner, under the shelter of a flight of steps that led up to a church in baroque style, an old woman roasting chestnuts and warming herself over a charcoal fire.

Again he heard the call, and this time looked up at the gardens that hung some feet above the rustic rock-pile. There, leaning over a fence made of unbarked tree trunks, he saw Sofia waving frantically to him with her hand. "What a nuisance!" he thought, his ill-humour boiling over. However, he leaned forward and stopped the carriage, while Sofia came running down a flight of steps that wound its way in and out among the stones in that picturesque though man-made landscape. Reaching the street, she leapt into the carriage and fell panting into a seat at Pietro's side.

"I was just going to your hotel," she explained, catching her breath. "Perhaps you can tell me where you have been, and where you are coming from now!"

The carriage had started again. Pietro gazed dreamily at the girl's long pointed nose.

"I've just been down to the office. The editor wanted to see me."

Wriggling about happily, Sofia made herself comfortable in her corner of the carriage, putting her feet up on the seat in front of her.

"A good idea, these carriages!" she chattered. "I haven't been in one for these hundred years! So you've been at the paper! But where did you spend the night?"

"Why, at the hotel!" lied Pietro, quite misled by her happy, frivolous tone. "What questions!"

"Yes, what questions!" she answered, with a strange suggestion of being hurt making its way through her thoughtless manner of speaking. "I should say, what answers! I have just been to the paper and to your hotel, and at neither place have they seen you since yesterday. You are really a very good liar. I'm beginning to think you must have a woman hidden somewhere."

She folded her arms across her chest and affected a cross little pout, giving a shake to her head of black curls and turning away from him. "At the very least you could have telephoned to say you were not coming to luncheon. But you didn't! Fine manners, I must say!"

The contrast between these half-serious reproaches and his own inner stress filled Pietro with a bitter, nervous impatience. "Here is my chance!" he thought. "I can tell her the truth and give her my decision." But there she sat! She had feelings, too! Could he hurt her as crudely as that? Besides, he did have a certain kindly affection for her! What restrained him, however, was not his tender-heartedness, but a reflection of a practical order. "I'll tell Matteo, that's what I'll do! That will be the quickest way out of it! It will rid Andreina of him, and me of Sofia!" Yet that cold calculation was not disjoined from a certain amount of fright and a deluge of regrets. This time, truly, he was making a vital decision. It was to affect his whole future, and in a direction quite opposite to all that he had hitherto been regarding as his best course in life. However, he was tired of entanglements and double-dealing and he was determined to be free of them. He had only one desire: to utter irrevocable words and do irreparable things, words and things that would prevent him from ever revising this, his final, decision. Meanwhile, an answer was expected of him.

"Yes," he said, and as he spoke he had the impression that he was making a painfully decisive move. "I am beginning to lie, and you are beginning to be jealous. A very bad sign, that!"

With a sudden jounce the carriage passed from a smooth asphalted section of the street to a stretch of rough paving. The clatter of the horse's hoofs now found an accompaniment in noises from the jostling wheels.

"I, jealous?" she exclaimed, in a deliberate, half-pleased tone, as though the notion were new to her and the thing might be worth trying. "I should like to know who wouldn't be, in my place! You lie to me! You cut my luncheons without warning! You neglect me!"

Huddled low inside his overcoat with his hands in his pockets and the brim of his hat pulled down over his eyes, Pietro was listening indifferently to his fiancée's complaint. His relieved and yet painful sense of having shaken off all doubts and regrets through his decision gave him a cold, cruel detachment and a bitter freedom of spirit.

"Well," he suddenly answered, "if it will do you any good to know it, it was on your account that I didn't stay in my room last night. I had to settle an old score with a certain person."

"On my account!" repeated Sofia, greedily, happy, surprised. "How on my account?"

"There was someone," he explained, "who kept insinuating that I was marrying you out of vanity and for money. In the end, seeing that I got nowhere with polite measures, I decided to resort to impolite ones. I gave him two cuffs that he will remember!"

Sofia bounced for joy on the carriage cushion, her curiosity overflowing. She seized her fiancé's arm and nestled close to him.

"Really?" she panted. "Two cuffs? And on my account? What did he say—that you are marrying me for money? And you gave him two cuffs? How amusing! How exciting! But now," she added, thoughtfully, gazing ahead of her, "now you'll have to have a duel! And—who is he?"

The carriage had stopped in front of the two dusty plaster caryatides that supported the mahogany-and-glass door of Pietro's hotel.

"One mentions the sin but never the sinner!" he answered, getting out. "As for the duel, there won't be any duel, because we finally patched things up. . . ."

They entered the hotel. In filtering through the thick dark-yellow curtains in the lobby the lean light of the winter's afternoon became strangely unreal, rich, heavy. Red night lamps were already lighted at the porters' bench and at either side of the staircase. Throughout the rest of the hall a dark shadow engulfed the false marble columns, the plaster festoons and coats of arms, and the many ornaments of leather and brass. The bellboys and waiters, each sitting or standing in his appointed place, were gazing motionless, silent and stupefied, at the thin sickle of light that found its way through the panes over the turnstile and faintly illumined a section of the thick dark carpet.

"I am furiously hungry," said Pietro, taking his fiancée by the arm and pushing her along in front of him. She seemed to be terribly disappointed that a perfectly good duel, fought on her account, should have gone up in smoke. "If you have nothing better to do, you might watch me eat. But I shall have to send you away afterward. I have a lot of work to do."

Sofia seemed not to be listening. She was surveying the environment inquisitively. Having been cheated of its duel, her curiosity was nibbling about for new pastures to invade.

"Where is your room?" she asked, impulsively. "I want to see your room."

"But I've got to have lunch! . . ."

"Have it served there! What's the harm?"

Nothing could be done in the face of such peremptory insistence. Pietro resignedly gave his orders to the porter and showed Sofia into the lift.

"But do you really live in a garret?" Sofia asked, as she saw the car pass one floor after another.

Pietro made no answer and still in silence they walked the length of the corridor and entered his little room.

It lay in semi-darkness from the dull grey weather. Pietro turned on a light, closed the blinds on the window, and then took off his coat and hat.

Strangely self-conscious and deferential, meanwhile, Sofia was looking about.

"How like you this all is!" she exclaimed, finally. "Bare, simple, almost a monastic cell! It's so like you not to have any pictures, photographs, or other trinkets. Nothing, just nothing! Only what is absolutely necessary! And this," she said, approaching the bed and stroking the pillow with a hesitating hand, "this is where you sleep nights?"

"Yes—why?"

"Oh, I don't know!" she answered, looking steadily at the pillow and still stroking it. "It seems silly of me, but I could almost weep!"

Pietro was standing in front of his mirror, looking at the heavy growth of beard that showed on his pale unshaven face. At those words he turned and looked at her. "There's the wife I am throwing over!" he could not help thinking. "And what am I getting in exchange?" However, that time again he made no answer. Instead, he turned on the water in the washbowl and made ready to shave. He had hardly finished when the door opened, and a waiter entered with his lunch.

"Oh, let me serve it!" cried Sofia, leaving her seat on the bed, the moment the waiter had gone. "I'd love to!"

She sat Pietro down at his table, took off her gloves, and with playful gestures of her own raised the covers of the various dishes and peeped under them, with little exclamations of wonder and delight.

"You must be hungry!" she remarked, tender, solicitous, bending over at his side and carefully ladling the soup into his plate.

"Yes, I am," returned Pietro, beginning to eat forthwith.

"They've sent you chicken," she continued, pointing, "and here are things to make the salad with. Shall I mix it?" And without waiting for permission, she took a spoon, filled it with vinegar, salt, and olive oil, and poured the mixture over the greens. Then, satisfied, she sat down opposite him, across the table.

For a time neither spoke. Pietro ate ravenously, his head bent low over his plate. With her arms folded and her chin resting on her hands, Sofia sat watching him, silent, amused. Her mute contemplation finally caught the young man's attention.

"Why do you look at me like that?" he asked.

She laughed.

"It's fun to see you eat. In so many ways you are just like a child. However—don't worry about me! Eat!"

Words, again, that sank deep into Pietro's spirit! "Strange the way things go!" he mused. "The very day I make up my mind to throw her over, she turns as charming as that! The love I have for that girl is the sincerest and most disinterested thing in this world!" And suddenly, he could not have told why, a cruelly morbid impulse came to him to plumb to the depths all the happiness that he was losing.

"What do you think it will be like, after we are married?" he began, and he reached over the dishes in front of him and pinched one of Sofia's hands. "Of course, we shall have babies around! You like children?"

He saw her face brighten, as though in mock offence that he should have thought of doubting it.

"Of course I do, silly!" she exclaimed. "What a question! Especially when they begin to walk, and all their curls are grown, and they are struggling with their first words. . . . They are darlings! . . ."

"They, you say?" Pietro warned, reaching for a pear and beginning carefully to pare it. "We can't afford more than one, or at the most two. We are not going to be rich."

"How can you be so sure of that?" she protested warmly. "I want four children, at the very least. As for the money, you may not have much, but I have plenty. I could support that many children all by myself. To say nothing of a flock of old aunts and uncles that will simply have to die some day! Then there's Maria Luisa. . . . By the way, Matteo is spending the afternoon with her. It really looks as though we shall soon be having her back with us."

"That's fine!" said Pietro, still working at the skin of his pear. "But don't you think that if I allow you to spend any great amount, I shall be playing into the hands of the person who got those two cuffs from me today?"

"Why no—how?" returned Sofia, giving a persuasive shake to her head of curls. "Your job, Bébé, will be to attend to your work and make as much of your career as you can. Don't worry about anything else. Besides, after we are married, anything I have will be yours too. So don't listen to the prattle of such people. You are always tormenting yourself on your own account. Why add to the qualms of conscience you create for yourself the mean things that people are bound to say of others anyway? . . ."

"Conscience is a good thing to have," said Pietro, suddenly remembering a thrust of Andreina's. "Look at the English. They sit on half the world, and have had little else but tender consciences."

"I don't know about the consciences of the English," Sofia commented, positive. "I do know that yours is too tender. But, after all, I love you because of that. It makes you so different. However, there are limits to everything."

He had finished his meal.

"Yes, there are limits to everything," he agreed, rising, and he thought that he was sincere when he added: "Limits even to things as delightful as this little visit from you!"

He stopped in the middle of the room and lighted a cigarette.

Sofia too had risen. She seemed to be thinking about something.

"What do you say?" she suddenly exclaimed. "Let's go and look at that apartment we were considering the other day."

"Oh, darling, I couldn't!" said Pietro, reaching for his coat. "I have no end of work waiting for me. Besides," he added earnestly, "that apartment would never do. The drawing-room and the library are altogether too small. You see, you will be doing a good deal of society, and I shall need lots and lots of books. We've got to have a house with at least two very large rooms. . . ."

"Well, I was thinking of that sunroom and porch . . ." she said, regretfully.

She had reached the door. Pietro picked up two books that lay wrapped on the table, and followed her out into the corridor.

VII

SINCE the day of his first meeting with Maria Luisa's sick brother, Pietro had regularly visited him. Just why he had allowed relations that had no basis in friendship to become so close he would have found it hard to explain very exactly, himself. At first, undoubtedly, a strong sense of compassion had figured in it, a pity inspired by the unfortunate situation of Stefano —sick, poor, and abandoned by everybody—and then intensified as a sort of reaction to the inhuman attitude of Maria Luisa. Later on, as the acquaintance ripened, pity had given place to a much less benevolent sort of interest made up of a blend of attraction and repulsion. However, he had not ceased his calls, largely because Stefano seemed to depend on him in many ways. In the end, succumbing to a youthful need of someone to confide in, he had allowed himself to inform the man, without mentioning any names, of the generic, external details of his double entanglement with Sofia and Andreina.

He had at once repented of that step, however. Instead of giving him useful or sympathetic counsel, or at the very least refraining from any sort of comment, Stefano had made haste to express an opinion which, given the character and the attitude of the man, was not so much foreseeable as inevitable. His judgment was of the same general type as Andreina's; but whereas she attributed Pietro's treachery, dishonesty, and double-dealing to an instinctive, unconquerable wickedness, that was still wicked, Stefano praised that same duplicity as of a superior and more constructive order, and therefore as the only one that he, or anyone else, should consider following.

Now nothing could have been more distasteful to Pietro than that sort of attitude. "If Andreina were right," he sometimes thought, "it would be bad enough. But if Stefano were right, it would be much worse—it would be intolerable. However, Stefano is certainly wrong, and the facts will prove it."

It was, therefore, with no great enthusiasm that he went up the stairs of the apartment house that same day, foreseeing with anticipatory discomfort all the unpleasant things that would be said to him and which he would have to answer, and at the same time going over in his mind, with increasing disgust, the character of the man and the relations that he had formed with him. "No understanding is possible between us," he thought. "I speak one language and he another. In addition, he wastes a lot of my time on silly errands. He may enjoy it. I certainly do not! In fact, all this is a positive pain and irritation to me. One can see that he does not feel the slightest gratitude for my visits and the help I give him, that he cares not a jot for me and would even refuse to see me if he were to find anyone who could serve his purposes better. Now I know and understand all that perfectly well! Yet I am enough of an idiot to visit him almost every day. . . . What luck if he should not be in! . . ."

Fraught with anger and disgust as these reflections were, Pietro still could not make up his mind to abandon the visit—and there, finally, was the Malacrida door in front of him! He pressed the bell regretfully and waited for someone to open.

He waited for a long time. "Nobody home!" he concluded finally, remembering the carriage at Andreina's door and the three people whom he had seen alighting from it. "Perhaps Stefano is out, too."

He was about to turn away, with a great sense of relief, when he heard someone coming down the corridor with a heavy lunging tread. The door opened, and Stefano stood on the threshold.

He was wearing a bright-coloured bathrobe that was, however, much rumpled and soiled. The crutches, in swinging from his armpits, kept it open in front, so that one could see his broad hairy chest and his powerful legs. These, however, were of unequal length. One rested solidly on the floor on the full sole. The other barely reached it with the tips of the toes.

"Oh," he exclaimed, good-humouredly, "it's you! Come in. How disappointed I am!"

"How is that?" asked Pietro, disconcerted. "Why do I disappoint you?"

"Come in, first," Stefano insisted, and he propelled himself to one side to make room for Pietro, closing the door after him. Pietro picked his way cautiously along the narrow over-furnished corridor. "I said disappointed, and I mean it," Stefano explained as he followed after, panting a little from the effort of walking with the crutches. "For a week past I have been at the window trying to get somewhere with a very appetizing maid who works in an apartment across the court. I made her understand that I was alone today. So when I heard the bell, my heart began to beat a little harder than ordinary. . . . Instead, it was you—intelligent, amusing, attractive, distinguished—anything you wish. All the same, I would have been better satisfied had it been the girl."

Exchanging gibes, they reached the big room at the end of the corridor. Everything seemed to be in place this time—the sofa near the window, the stand with the chair near the sofa, the iron bed with its white patched spread in its corner, the tripod stand with the washbowl and pitcher behind its portière—the whole giving that shabby, half-dirty impression that one associates with unoccupied rooms that are waiting to be sub-let. A small looking-glass hung askew from the window latch, and on a stool underneath stood a basin of water and Stefano's brush, razor, and other shaving utensils.

Stefano reached the window with two great swings on his crutches, then, after a glance into the mirror, began to lather his face with the brush.

"Well, what's the news?" he asked, indifferently, intent upon his task. "How goes it?"

Pietro had dropped into the rattan armchair near the window.

"Very badly!" he answered, mechanically.

"As regards the mistress or the fiancée?" Stefano asked the question in his usual polite and conventionally familiar tone, that was cold, however, entirely devoid of sympathy and even of real interest or curiosity.

Understanding that it was now too late to draw back, Pietro resigned himself once more to the role of informant on himself that had come to seem natural to him. He smiled nervously.

"I said things are going badly. That is probably being unjust to myself. Perhaps I ought to say that things are going splendidly. I have made up my mind to do, as they say, the right thing."

"The right thing!" repeated Stefano slowly, keeping to his lathering, without turning around. "What would the right thing be—or at least, what do you mean by the right thing?"

"Why did I ever begin talking with this fellow?" fumed Pietro to himself, disgustedly. "And why do I keep it up?" What annoyed him most was not so much the comments that Stefano made, as his own indiscretion in having revealed, and in continuing to reveal, to such a man matters that lay very close to his heart. However, he saw no way of retreating just then.

"Sacrificing one's interests," he replied, "going against one's inclinations—hasn't that always been considered doing the right thing?"

"It all depends," said the cripple, without turning around. He had finished lathering his face and was examining the job in the looking-glass. "Supposing you drop the oratory and give us the facts."

"Well," answered Pietro after a moment's silence, with some effort. "The facts are as follows. You know the situation—I do not need to go over that again. You also know that my best interests lie in dropping my mistress and marrying my fiancée. I mean that, whereas nothing good can ever come to me from the direction of my mistress, the marriage in question would be of decisive advantage to my future. What would anybody do in my place? Wouldn't one drop the mistress and make the marriage?"

"Well," interrupted Stefano, "one might also keep the mistress and marry just the same."

Pietro flushed, and then replied:

"Of course! But in any event, one would not think of sacrificing the marriage. And yet, that is exactly what I have decided to do. I am going to break my engagement with Sofia and marry the other girl. That is what I call doing the right thing. Have I made myself clear?"

There was a long silence.

"I don't mean to stick my nose into business of yours," Stefano finally commented, turning around. He laid down his brush, fastened a strop to the same window latch, and began to sharpen his razor. "But before I did anything like that, I would stop and consider very carefully. It's conceivable that what you call the right thing might turn out to be a stupid thing."

"How do you figure that out?"

Stefano took the razor, brought his face close to the looking-glass, and with one sweep removed the lather from half of one cheek. He bent over and cleaned the razor on the edge of the basin.

"Why, you would be doing something that you would certainly repent of afterwards. You've gone and lost your head over that woman—and so far nothing wrong! What man has not lost his head at some time or other over some woman? I've done it so many times I have stopped counting. The trouble begins when you start jilting a fiancée on account of that woman. To begin with, plenty of women make tip-top mistresses and wretched wives. But then, didn't you tell me that it is of the utmost advantage for you to marry Maria Luisa's sister-in-law? Well, what more do you want? The girl is rich. She has a title. Do you like money, or don't you? . . . Do you like good society, or don't you? I take it you do. Well, why throw overboard the things you want to go looking for things that you are damned certain you don't want?"

"How do you know I don't want them?" Pietro retorted. "I am in love with that woman. And then, who told you I wanted money and good society?"

"Why, you did!" Stefano returned, calmly enough. He halted his shaving and turned partly around till he caught Pietro in the corner of an eye. "If you didn't want those things, how could it be so much to your interest to marry Sofia?"

Pietro bit his lips.

"Well," he finally asked, "what would you do in my place?"

Stefano did not answer at once. Working his razor carefully, he was removing remnants of lather from his neck, throat, and chin.

"What would I do in your place!" he finally repeated. "This is what I would do: Until I was married safe and sound and had made sure of my wife, I would keep my mistress mighty quiet—but I would keep her. Then after I was married," he added, jovially, "I would still keep her. In that way I would save both the goat and the cabbages, and satisfy everybody—wife, mistress, and myself included. If there is anything righter than that, I don't happen to know what it would be."

"The right thing!" cried Pietro, unable to conceal his heat. "I'd call it a perfectly crooked thing!"

A glitter of anger trembled in Stefano's eye, but he contained himself and turned towards the mirror again.

"Yes, of course!" he commented, without turning around. "I forgot! For you the right thing is—what did you say it was?"

"Acting against one's own advantage," said Pietro, flushing red.

"Yes, that was it. Acting against your own advantage! That's like telling a banker that the right thing for him to do is to bust his bank. Where the right comes in is what I don't see. In that way you would leave everybody dissatisfied. First, yourself, because, after all, what you really want is to have the wife and keep the mistress. Second, Sofia, who loves you and wants to marry you. And third, probably, that other woman, who may not want to marry you at all. Yes, exactly so! And by the way," he added, casually, turning half-way around and looking at him, "does that mistress of yours know about your designs upon her?"

"Not yet!" replied Pietro embarrassed. "But tonight——"

"And you think," Stefano interrupted, with an ironical anticipation, "you think she will accept?"

"Why shouldn't she?"

"Because she shouldn't!" replied the cripple, affecting a professorial serenity. "A self-respecting kept-woman, who has her looks, her youth, and her health, and who knows her business, would not be such an idiot as to marry a bank-account the size of yours."

Pietro had lost his temper. He leapt to his feet.

"You will be so good as not to use that expression of the girl in question. She is a person who does not deserve it in any way. Remember—you do not know her!"

The young man's flurry did not seem to disturb Stefano.

"I said kept-woman," he returned, calm, pleased with himself, "because that term fits the woman you described to me exactly. . . . Of course the day you marry her, I should consider it inappropriate. But do you know what I think?" he added, aiming to take Pietro off his guard, "I think that your whole story is a hoax. Come now, there is no such woman! She doesn't exist!"

"She exists all right," answered Pietro. He had sat down again, visibly irritated, drawing his chin down inside the collar of his coat.

"What's her name?"

Pietro looked up. In the usually so inexpressive eyes of the invalid he caught that glint of cruel but cautious hope that sparkles in the eyes of the pot-hunter as he sees a bird flying towards the bush that he has spread with lime.

"Yes," he answered, with a wry smile, "so that you can run her down and, like the good friend you are, either rob me of her, or bring her to the point where she will have no more use for me! Thanks ever so much! But I am getting to know you. There are mistakes that I shall never make with you!"

Stefano snickered, picked up his brush, and began to lather his face for the second time.

"Really, you flatter me," he finally said—and Pietro thought he could detect a trace of disappointment in his jesting tone. "Here I am, a man on crutches, with these legs, and penniless to boot. Lots of danger I'd be to you—an up-and-doing youngster, healthy as Satan—without any money to speak of, that's true, but with prospects, with prospects! Besides, what kind of a wife would she make if you trust her as little as that? But yes—of course, I keep forgetting. Your idea is just to do the right thing, which means marrying her. Having done the right thing, the rest wouldn't matter!" He paused for a moment, thoughtful. Then with a sort of angry, acid aggressiveness, he resumed: "Yes, the right thing! Well, suppose we admit it's that. But when you have done it, what have you gained? Do you think you will manage to change? That you will be less greedy for money, less concerned to get on in society?"

Pietro shivered at that allusion, which of everything that he heard said to his discredit always angered him the most. In his judgment, social vanity was the most vulgar of all manifestations of vanity.

"So," he asked hoarsely, "you consider me a man of social vanities—a climber?"

"A climber to the core!" answered the cripple, angry, triumphant. "You stink of snobbery!" He spoke slowly, deliberately, much pleased with himself. "For that matter, who doesn't? We all do! But people like you, who pretend not to, are the worst of all. Tell me the truth," he added, suddenly turning around and smiling, with a wink. "You're not really hurt, are you, when I say that you stink of snobbery?"

Pietro's temper had gone out of bounds.

"Well," he retorted angrily, "would you be much hurt if I said you were a cripple?"

They looked at each other, Pietro shrinking low into his armchair, flushed with anger and shame, Stefano with his forced smile which, at each second that passed, like a glass of water absorbing a tablet of green poison, took on a deeper and deeper tinge of malice and hate.

"I accused you of being a snob," Stefano finally replied. "You show yourself to be something of a boor. I know I am a cripple. Did you need to remind me of it?"

Pietro thought he perceived a depth of suffering in the man's plaintive rebuke. He bitterly repented of his offensive allusion.

"You are absolutely right, Stefano," he said, biting his lips and wrinkling his forehead. "But you on your side—why do you always say things that hurt? I don't know why it is, but I always lose my temper when I am with you. Now it's absurd to be always quarrelling the way we do. However, that was not the point. You were quite right. What I said was in very bad taste. I should never have said it."

There was a brief silence. Stefano was now shaving against the grain. No outward sign betrayed his reaction to the young man's apology.

"Perhaps you shouldn't have," he agreed finally. "But then, I suppose, since you won't tell me your girl's name, perhaps you will introduce me to your fiancée. . . ."

"Gladly!" cried Pietro, surprised, pleased. "Any time you say!"

Stefano laid down his razor.

"I am a snob, you see," he continued negligently. "I do want to get on in society, and there's no language to describe how much I want money. So I'll try to cut you out! Even if I don't succeed in that quite, I hope this Sofia of yours will be nice to me. . . ."

"What do you mean by that?"

Stefano smiled.

"You won't try to tell me that at twenty-eight she doesn't know what the world is like? Well," he added, quietly, "if she has with others, why not with me?"

Apparent to Pietro in that remark was a vulgar and direct effort at retaliation. Stefano did not know Sofia. He had never seen her and evidently had no desire to make her acquaintance. There could have been no motive, therefore, for his insulting proposition except a strangely narrow-minded, brazen, and determined spite. Pietro's face hardened in resentment. He leapt to his feet.

"You may thank your lucky stars that you are a cripple," he proffered. "Otherwise I should consider myself obliged to give you a lesson."

"Now that—now that!" returned the invalid, looking at him, smiling.

"For that matter," Pietro continued, sitting down again, "the fault is all mine. I should never have allowed Sofia's name to be pronounced in your presence. And there is something else that I should have done, and long before now: I should have dropped you! I should have completely severed relations which bring all sorts of advantages to you, but only unpleasant irritations to me! . . ."

Stefano did not lose his smile.

"Well, now, down to yesterday," he commented, quietly, "I should have been mighty sorry, had you, as you say, severed relations. Carlino has gone in for high life, and I couldn't count on him any more. Really I should have been put to it to find a substitute for him. But that is not the situation today. Today I have found a person who will not only keep me company as agreeably as you do, and even more agreeably, but who will provide me with other things that I need and cannot expect from you—you know what I mean. So if you are inclined to go away, do so, by all means. But I am not driving you away, notice! I am not so well supplied with friends that I can afford a luxury of that sort. So—if you are inclined to stay, stay! I am merely saying that you are not indispensable to me now, as you have been hitherto—that's all."

Hurt, irresolute, Pietro surveyed him. He was irritated to note that Stefano had anticipated him in considering a break, and even more by the fact that he had managed to dig up a woman somewhere by his own devices without any assistance from him.

"Who is the person you refer to?" he asked.

"Now that—now that!" returned the invalid. "You would like to know, wouldn't you! But supposing I prefer not to tell you, the way you are doing with that woman of yours?"

"I don't see the analogy!"

"Well, now, I'm a good-natured fellow, and some day or other I'll tell you." He had finished shaving. Two swings on his crutches took him to the washstand, where he picked up the pitcher and poured some water into the bowl. "All I can tell you just now is that she has been the great remorse in my life." He contributed that remark without any trace of sorrow. In fact, his expression betrayed a very evident satisfaction with himself. He leaned over and began noisily to splash the water up over his face.

Pietro sat motionless and silent in his chair, considering the man. His curiosity was great, but great also was his sense of loathing. He ended by asking:

"Why the remorse?"

Stefano lifted a bloated dripping face from the washbowl, reached for a towel, and began to wipe himself, puffing and blowing.

"Well," he began, hanging the soiled towel on its hook, "you've got to promise not to breathe a word of what I say to anybody. That means either to your mistress or to that woman you are going to marry! You see, I've got to admit it myself—it was a thing that you could never call the right thing with the greatest charity in the world."

There was the same strange contrast between the grave contrition that his words bespoke and the self-satisfied tone in which he uttered them.

"Why should I tell anybody?" asked Pietro.

"Oh, one never knows!" Stefano replied. He swung himself to the bed, sat down on the edge of it, stood his crutches to one side, and then leaned forward, bringing his bald head with its ring of black curly hair into the glare of pale light that came from the window. He seemed to drop away into a profound abstraction. "I suppose, really, I oughtn't to tell anybody, myself," he finally began. "Especially to you, for I can see by the readiness with which you chatter about your own affairs that you are not a good person to trust with a secret. But I'll risk it, I'll risk it! . . . It was all of ten years ago, when I still had prospects in life and was thinking of going into training for the diplomatic service. I was poor, and Maria Luisa wouldn't do anything for me then, any more than she will now. So I went to board with a certain family. It was a family more or less like this one—a widower, three or four children. It was winter, an unusually cold winter, and one day I slipped on a bit of ice on the sidewalk and broke a bone in my ankle. These legs of mine have always been a pest to me! Nothing much, of course—but I was obliged to keep to my room for several weeks. Dull, dull, how dull! You see, I didn't know a soul who would have been willing to make the sacrifice of keeping me company. Now, all that is just the setting for the story. I haven't come to that yet."

At that point Stefano paused. He was strangely moved and seemed to have difficulty with his breathing. It was as though the memories he was turning over were still too fresh, so that he could not go back to them without a stirring of his old sensuous excitement. He looked at Pietro in silence, a convulsed but self-satisfied smile wreathing his face.

"In that family," he began again, "was a young girl—fourteen maybe, perhaps not quite fourteen—I don't just remember. But she was pretty, beautiful. In fact, those are not the words. Put it this way: She was something altogether unusual, altogether so. A pale white skin, with dark earnest eyes, and a magnificent carriage—proud, majestic! She was fully developed in body, though she still dressed like a schoolgirl. She hardly ever spoke. She was quiet, too quiet if anything—too self-contained. In a word, precocious, precocious of mind as well as of body! Already the woman that she might have been and actually became! Well, to make a long story short, the people in the house saw that I was lonely and they sent her in to keep me company. Not a day passed after that, that she didn't spend hour after hour in my room. At first everything went splendidly. We laughed, joked, played checkers, cards. Finally, one day—it was an afternoon, I remember, just about this time of day—we were playing I forget what game, when the girl suddenly laughed, and I saw her looking at me over her shoulder, sidewise like, but with a coquetry that couldn't have been more perfect. She might as well have asked me to, in so many words. At any rate, the idea of an affair with her got into my head then, and it never went away again.

"Naturally, at first I tried not to think of such a thing. I told myself I was crazy, that it had all been a passing fancy on her part. As usually happens in such cases, the thing got on my mind and I could think of nothing else. I couldn't sleep nights, and when she was in the room I suffered the tortures of the damned, going over to the exactly opposite attitude. So in the end I made up my mind that I would get what I wanted, and coolly, calmly, I fixed the day, the hour, and the way, in which I would get it. 'It will cause a scandal,' I said to myself. 'It will probably get me into jail. No matter! I have made up my mind and I'm going through with it,' and so I did.

"Afterwards, I must say, I was scared, scared out of my wits. I didn't see how the thing could possibly be kept quiet. I was sure the girl would talk, or that she or I would betray the business in some way or other. Instead, luck was with me. No one noticed anything. Precocious in that as in everything else, she played her part to perfection. That night she pretended she was ill or something, and went to bed early. You can imagine that I, for my part, swore to myself that that was the beginning and the end, that I would never do the thing again. But all I had to do was see her the next day for my good resolutions to go up in smoke.

The harm had been done, I reasoned, and there was no help for it. So what better to do than pass the time as pleasantly as possible?"

Stefano ended his story. His face bore a deeper flush than at the beginning, and he smiled and tossed his head as though he were trying to drive from his mind fancies that were far too pleasurable and tempting. He sat looking steadily at the young man in front of him.

Pietro returned his gaze. He was not scandalized. His feeling was more like repugnance, something akin to loathing. "It's not that he did such a thing," he said to himself. "The point is, he's doing it all over again in his mind, feigning remorse in order to gloat over the memory. What a beast!" The red glossy face of the man was an unpleasant thing to look upon. Feeling that he ought to say something, however, Pietro lowered his eyes and asked, not quite succeeding in disguising his feelings:

"Tell me one thing! Before you carried out your grand design, you say you thought of the scandal there might be, and of the consequences to the poor girl, if the two of you were discovered. Did it ever occur to you to think what it might mean to the girl herself?"

Too engrossed with his memories to perceive the hidden barb in Pietro's question, Stefano shook his head.

"No, really, I don't believe it did."

There was another silence. Both Pietro and Stefano sat looking at the window, through which, strangely deformed by imperfections in the glass, one could see the wall of the building across the court, white, with its rusty water drains, its green-curtained windows, its ventilation pipes, its roof-houses and water tanks.

"The only comment I might have to make," Pietro suddenly observed, "is that you set out to describe to me the great remorse in your life. I don't see where the remorse came in. Your story, so far, shows everything except remorse."

"That your impression?" asked Stefano, in an uncertain tone.

He was evidently pleased, as he passed a hand over his face. "Well, you may be right. You know, I think this remorse business is overdone! In my case, for instance, there are two things to notice. I am absolutely certain that if it hadn't been I, it would have been somebody else sooner or later. That girl was bound to become the woman she turned out to be. In the second place, innocent and inexperienced as she may have been, she made me suffer more than any other woman ever did. You may not believe it, but she had a slyness and a devilry that were something quite exceptional. . . ."

"But afterwards!" pressed Pietro. "What happened afterwards? You separated?"

"Not so soon!" Stefano replied. "For two months or more, what with quarrels, imprudences, crazy tantrums, she made me stand about everything a woman could make a man stand. I remember that when we parted"—and Stefano dropped into a thoughtful mood—"she showed an indifference you would hardly imagine possible. Not a tear, not an attitude, not a word, that gave me any indication that she cared whether I went or stayed! However little sorrow I may have felt myself, I am sure I felt more than she did. Strange creature!"

"You have never seen her since?"

"Once! That was four years ago, in Milan! She didn't know I saw her. She was with a little, sawed-off, bald-headed chap—nothing attractive about him and old enough to be her father. But she had turned out a beauty, I'll say! I lost her in the crowd, and after that, try as I might, I could find no trace of her. . . . That was down to yesterday! Yesterday I did."

In the silence that followed, Pietro kept shaking and tossing his head as though to expel the depressing, annoying thoughts that filled it. He rose, took a few steps about the room, and then sat down again.

"And now?" he asked, with an ill-concealed sarcasm. "You are going to call on her, I suppose, and you probably foresee that she will welcome you with outstretched arms, if she doesn't actually grovel at your feet. Aren't you afraid she will throw you out? Admit, at least, that it would serve you right if she threw you head foremost down the stairs!"

Stefano made no answer. He rose, adjusted the crutches to his armpits, and in two swings was at the door. He reached out and unhooked his coat from a nail.

"I have my reasons for believing that I shall be well received," he finally commented.

"When are you going to see her?" asked Pietro.

"Now!" said the invalid. "In fact, if you've nothing better to do, you might come along with me—as far as the door, I mean. She lives on the Lungotevere dei Gracchi."

"Andreina's street!" thought Pietro, and his heart began to beat violently. He looked at Stefano and in a flash was sure that the victim of that early enterprise in seduction had been no other than she. "That's the man who made her what she is now!" he raged inwardly. "It's to him I owe my finding her in her present frame of mind!" And he understood also why Stefano was so sure of being able to re-establish the old relations with her. He could see no doubt that, despondent and bewildered as she then was, Andreina would again fall under that same sinister influence. His pity for the woman increased in proportion with his hatred of the invalid. "Poor Andreina! Poor Andreina!" He thought he had never loved her as fiercely as at that moment, when he at last understood, through Stefano's indiscretions, the source of the despairing and unshakable philosophy that had taken such a deep root in her.

He sat there shaking his head, biting his lips, tapping the floor with his right foot.

"What's the matter?" asked Stefano.

"The matter is," replied Pietro grimly, "that if I were to wring your neck this minute I should consider I would be doing very little harm and a very praiseworthy thing!"

Stefano did not smile for once. He stopped in the middle of the room on his crutches, and looked at Pietro steadily.

"You know, Monatti—you are beginning to get on my nerves! I have already told you that now that I have found this woman again I do not need you any more. So then, if you feel the way you seem to, go away! If you intend to stay, you had better drop that sort of language."

"The woman's name is Andreina, is it not?" asked Pietro, speaking rapidly.

"What woman?"

"The woman you were going to see!"

"Yes," exclaimed Stefano, astonished. But he did not have time to finish.

"In that case," Pietro interrupted, "you understand why I thought of wringing your neck. The woman you seduced, and the woman whom I intend to marry and whose name I refused to mention, are the same person."

Stefano burst into a free, joyous, youthful laugh.

"My poor Monatti—oh! But you should have told me sooner, you know!"

"What good would that have done?"

"Well," said the cripple, bubbling with good humour. "It would have kept me from telling you the story of that youthful mistake of mine."

Angrily Pietro wrung his hands till they crackled at the joints.

"Stefano," he finally asked, "might one talk to you in earnest, and ask a favour of you?"

"Why not?"

"Well, as a favour then: Don't look Andreina up! Leave her alone! It will be better that way for everybody! And mind you," he added, looking up at the invalid from under his eyebrows, "I'm not asking that of you because I'm jealous, or because I'm afraid you'll get her away from me. . . . You can do Andreina a lot of harm. . . . She is already distracted, for private reasons of her own. If you were to go there, you would ruin her life for a second time. . . . If you are unwilling to do it for my sake—though I think I am entitled to some show of friendship on your part—do it for Andreina's sake, since you pretend to have loved her once. Your reappearance at this moment would certainly be a disaster."

Stefano gave a wry twist to his mouth, and with one swing on his crutches reached the window. From there he looked down into the courtyard.

"First of all," he said, turning around again, "I don't see why a visit from me should occasion all the disasters you mention. As usual you are trying to make very simple things look complicated. . . . There's nothing here of all you say. What's here is a pretty woman who may or may not feel for me the way she did ten years ago. . . . Then again, I don't see why you should be so afraid of my taking her away from you. As I said, I don't think I would be a very dangerous rival—sick, poor, crippled. . . ."

"But I was careful to explain to you that I eliminated any question of jealousy," said Pietro, fiercely angry.

"Well," said the invalid, positively, "if it's not jealousy, I give up!"

"To come to the point: will you, or will you not, do me the favour I asked?"

As he spoke, Pietro rose and advanced upon the cripple.

"I certainly won't if you ask it in that tone of voice!" said Stefano quietly. He was again looking out of the window. "Besides," he added, as though thinking aloud, "I don't know whether I am in a position to throw away such a good opportunity. Andreina can come in pretty handy for me, she can. I haven't so many women within reach that I can afford to neglect any of them. That she's your mistress, that she's worried, that you intend to marry her—those are all things that concern me not at all, and that I might very well overlook entirely. . . . To answer your question then: No, I don't think it suits me to do you the favour you ask."

"Yes," began Pietro, his anger overflowing. "You won't do it as a favour! But you will do it of necessity!" And before Stefano had time to think of defending himself, Pietro had seized him by the shirt front and thrown him upon his back across the sofa.

An expression of great and abject terror overspread the cripple's fat face.

"Help!" he cried. "Valentina! . . . Professor! . . . Help!"

The flabby body of the invertebrate, as it lay there with the helpless legs doubled over the edge of the sofa, seemed to transform Pietro's loathing into a sanguinary, half-homicidal cruelty. He was tempted to strangle the fellow then and there, or at the very least to batter his face beyond recognition.

"Don't be afraid!" he actually proffered, through grated teeth. "Don't be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm just going to fix things so that you won't be able to do any harm!"

He gave him another jounce on the sofa, then picked up the two crutches and moved to a safe distance in the middle of the room.

Trembling all over, Stefano hitched painfully around till he lay lengthwise on the sofa; then he managed to get his legs up and stretch them out too. He finally found a comfortable position, and his frightened face recovered its normal tranquillity.

A long silence followed.

"I suppose you feel like a hero!" he said at last. "But don't you see that if it isn't today, it will be tomorrow, or some other day? In the end I am going to see your Andreina—or rather mine."

"Well, keeping to today," said Pietro, breathing hard, "I think we've got you pretty well placed. As for days hereafter, if you go anywhere near that girl, you will be sorry!"

"Now that—now that! . . ." cried Stefano, with a laugh that he made as scornful as he could. "Yes, that! . . ."

He reached over the edge of the sofa for his guitar, and began to tune it.

Holding the two crutches in one hand, Pietro looked around the room, thinking. Finally he pushed the table up to the sofa and laid on it the two books he had brought from the hotel.

"Books," he said, pointing, "in case you feel like reading! . . . Or perhaps you'll be thirsty—here's some water." He took the water-bottle from the commode and set it beside the books, with a glass. He considered again as to what else the invalid might need. "Perhaps you'll want a smoke! . . ." He put his hand into a pocket, took out some matches and a box of cigarettes, and tossed them also upon the table. Stefano gave a glance at the provisions and then went back to his strings. "So, I guess everything is clear," Pietro concluded. "You are not going near Andreina! Good-bye!"

And he walked out of the room.

He turned on a light in the corridor, and wondered what he could do with the crutches. He decided that it would be best to destroy them. It would take Stefano at least two days to provide himself with new ones. But when he tried to break one across his knee, he found that the wood was tough and hard. He could not even bend it. He straightened up and considered again. "After all," he finally concluded, "there's no law against going around with crutches, even if you are not a cripple. I'll take them to the hotel." And stowing them as comfortably as he could under his left arm he went out into the stair shaft.

VIII

WITH her head lowered, her shoulders drooping, Andreina walked across the river drive, drawing cheeks that were still red from the two blows low down into her fur collar. With her head still lowered she slammed the gate behind her, then ran across the garden all the way to the door of her apartment. Her cheeks were on fire. There was a buzzing in her head. She would not have been willing to admit it, but the cuffs she had received had given her, less of the regulation contempt that she had thrown into her lover's face, than a certain rabid self-satisfaction. It was all right and proper, she said to herself! She had deserved a beating! All the days of her life she had been destined to insults and mistreatment, not to caresses and tender words! Seething, in a frightful hurry, still burying her cheeks in the fur collar, she waited till the door unlocked and then almost upset the astonished Cecilia with the push she gave it. From the vestibule she hurried straight to her bedroom and threw herself upon the bed, her face downturned into the pillow, one leg bent at the knee and resting on the bed, the other projecting straight out over the edge.

She lay there for some time, without moving, without weeping, breathing angrily and hard, opening dry eyes wide into the darkness of the pillow. Thoughts trooped in a mad riot through her head. If she considered herself, a savage will for a complete and final devastation obsessed her, like a gale of wind blowing upon a burning building that was about to fall. If she thought of Pietro, she perceived, to her great surprise, that she bore him no ill-will at all, that indeed she had greater respect for him. He had struck her, but she had never suspected him of as strong a character as that.

When, therefore, after she had lain that way for some moments, the bell rang, her thoughts ran directly to Pietro; and not with the rancorous antipathy that his mistreatment might have justified, but with a rapid, bitter, distorted calculation. She would feign the most abject submission, evince the humility of the whipped dog, kiss the hand that had punished her, show herself as she thought she was and wished to be—abased and debased, incapable of any act of revolt, submissive to the violence of others, as she was to her own impulses! In that way, she figured, Pietro would become convinced of her scant worth and, therewith, of the uselessness of further efforts to straighten her out and make her over.

In this swirl of cerebration she lay listening, her ears intent. She heard footsteps in the corridor, then two knocks on the door, and a male voice calling:

"May I come in?"

She did not change her position nor remove her eyes from the pillow, but with a vigorous wriggling of her sides and shoulders and an agile manipulation of her arms, she freed herself in a trice of her fur coat and tossed it aside upon the floor. Under that heavy and expensive wrap she had been wearing only a light silk undergarment with lace trimmings, that left her arms, thighs, and much of her chest bare. Not proud and disdainful, but half naked, provocative, imploring, would she offer herself to the astonished eyes of Pietro as he entered her room! She liked the idea, besides. Such an attitude, devoid of both dignity and modesty, would be much more in keeping with her actual state of mind than the phrase of contempt she had hurled at him out there on the drive.

There, then, she lay, in her first position, with her arms around her head, one leg bent at the knee and resting on the bed, the other projecting over the side.

"Yes, come in!" she called.

The door opened and someone entered.

But on these first sounds a deep, and in a measure astonished, silence followed. Pietro seemed to have stopped on the threshold, as though not quite sure of what he ought to say or do. It therefore occurred to her to reinforce the appeal of her nudity and abjection with a significant gesture that would be so melodramatic and sentimental as to leave no doubt about her utter, and basic, worthlessness.

"You did right in giving me a beating," she said, slowly, in a grave, plaintive tone. "It was what I deserved. But now you must be good to me. You must be good to your little Andreina, and show her that you love her. You must give your little Andreina a kiss—here!"

And without raising her downturned eyes from the pillow, she extended a hand, and with a slow, languorous, lingering movement removed the strap of her undergarment from her shoulder, baring one side of her chest completely.

"Put it here!" she specified more clearly, pointing to a spot on her naked shoulder.

Against all that she had foreseen, she felt no answering pressure from Pietro's lips upon the naked spot she had so tenderly indicated, nor upon any other part of her prostrate form. The unseen visitor, in fact, maintained a deeper silence, which she intuitively appraised as suspicious, embarrassed, and perhaps replete with disgust. "What if it weren't Pietro!" it suddenly occurred to her to wonder, and with a movement as chaste and rapid as the other had been seductive and slow, she sat up on the bed, drew the lace fringe of her garment down over her thighs, and crossed her legs. She saw in front of her a person who was not Pietro and whose demeanour seemed to suggest an apology. "Don't be alarmed—it doesn't matter! You thought I was someone else. It's all my fault."

Such a visit being altogether remote from any expectation on her part, it was a second or more before she identified the person as her father.

For a moment neither of them spoke. Andreina did not know what to say, torn as she was between a sense of angry annoyance at receiving a visit so unforeseen and so inopportune and shame at having said what she had said and done what she had done in the presence of the one man in the world to whom she should not have offered such an allurement. On his side, the professor was embarrassment incarnate. What he had seen and heard had prompted him to a rather hazy indignation of the conventional type, but it had also filled him with self-consciousness. That nudity, those words, those movements, of his daughter, had reminded him confusedly that by that time Andreina's life had departed altogether from his orbit, and, for better or worse, developed along lines of its own. Hence repression of a hazy, paternal impulse to be wroth, dread lest he might fail to attain the purpose he had come to attain, but more especially a vague alarm, as though he had made a mistake in entering the room, and as though that semi-naked woman were not his daughter but a stranger, who had a right to resent his intrusion and might very easily throw him into the street.

In view of all that, the father's basic attitude was in fact that of a person who has made a mistake and is concerned to excuse himself; and he, therefore, was the first to speak.

Giving a perplexed pull at his beard, he began, in a worried tone:

"Andreina, don't you know me? I'm papa. . . . It wasn't till yesterday that your sister told me where you were living. . . . So I thought: Why not a little surprise for her, since I haven't seen her for so long a time? . . . So here I am. . . . But, yes—of course! You were expecting someone? . . ."

"I was not expecting anyone," replied Andreina, dropping into her soft, hushed tone.

Sitting on the bed, with her legs tightly crossed and one arm thrown over the head of the bed in a careless, unconcerned manner, she none the less felt the strain of her substantial nudity. She tried to keep the lace fringe of her garment down over her thighs, which showed goose-pimples from mingled cold and shame, and to draw the low-cut garment higher up over her semi-naked breast. "Someone will be here later on," she added, after a moment, frowning and lowering her eyes. "Probably you'll be willing to leave the moment he comes!"

"Of course, of course!" fussed the professor, quite reassured by the welcome he had received, sitting down, and looking curiously about the room. "Of course, of course! When he comes, I go—agreed! . . . And, by the way, I was sure you would be glad to see me, after all this time. I have brought Maddalena. She wanted to see you too. Every day she kept saying to me: 'When are we going to Andreina's?' 'What's Andreina doing?' 'Why doesn't Andreina come to see us?' So when I told her that we were coming at last, it was an uproar! She's out there in the hall with Valentina! Shall I bring her in?"

"Oh, really!" said Andreina, coldly, disdainfully. Her father's ways and manner of speaking had revived all the old rancours of home. "I don't see how Maddalena can be so interested in me. When I left home she was two years old!"

"You'll see how she has grown!" said the professor, ignoring the argument and dashing out of the door.

He came back a second later, leading by the hand the poor ugly little child with the pale face, the black hair, and the black, too expressive eyes. Behind him came Valentina, greeting her sister with a familiar wave of the hand. The child, bashful, shrank back against her father's legs, looking steadily out of suspicious eyes at this unknown and older sister. Valentina, instead, went straight to Andreina and kissed her on the cheek.

"Just getting up?" she asked, cheerily, with a glance at the still unmade room. "Better late than never!"

Whether in view of her nudity or out of deliberate insolence, Andreina had not risen. She sat there still with her legs tightly crossed, keeping her eyes obstinately to the floor and refusing to raise them.

"No, I'm not just getting up!" she answered, cold, annoyed. "I went out for a walk on the drive along the river, so I threw my coat over this chemise. That's all. In fact," she added after a moment, ill-humouredly, "toss me a dress—anything—my black one will do. Then I'll get dressed and that will be that!"

Knowing the house well, Valentina did not go to the closet, but to a false door near the door into the bathroom that concealed a little wardrobe. She opened it, and began to go over the gowns that hung in it in line.

"Walking on the drive!" exclaimed the professor, perplexed, unable to take his curious eyes off his daughter. "On the drive without a hat and in your underclothes!"

"Yes, on the drive without a hat and in my underclothes!" repeated Andreina, aggressively. "Anything wrong with that?"

"No—no! Nothing wrong!" fidgeted the professor, running to cover. "Yes, of course—there's never anybody on the drive to worry about!"

Valentina found the garment that her sister had suggested. She brought it out and began to turn it round and round in the light from the window.

"But it's an evening gown!" she cried, shocked. "It's for formal evening wear!"

"Well, what of it?" snapped Andreina. "Let's have it!"

The sister drew near, holding the garment in her two hands, and measuring with expert, admiring eyes the lowness of the cut and the length of the train.

"You have a party this evening?" she ventured.

"Of course not!" said Andreina, earnest. "I never go to parties. That's why I wear it at this time of day."

And she rose abruptly from the bed and went and stood in the middle of the room. In silent stupefaction the professor and the child saw her raise her arms and put the dress on over her head, the sister helping.

"What a dream!" cried Valentina, joining her hands and stepping back in ecstasy. Andreina, grave, pale, stood where she was in the magnificent low-cut, armless garment. "And to think it means so little to you! I don't know what I would not give, to have a dress like that!"

The professor was more impressed by Valentina's exclamation than by the gown itself. He was not convinced, altogether. After considering the superb figure of his daughter for a time, he thought he would risk a remark.

"But behind, there!" he pointed. "Isn't there a button missing, or something! Perhaps a pin? It should be all open that way?"

Frowning, thoughtful, Andreina made no answer. But Valentina laughed.

"A pin, a button missing! Do you hear that! Why, the beauty of it is just there!"

"What beauty are you talking about!" retorted the professor, his feelings hurt. "In the first place all that nakedness is indecent. But never mind that! You could say the thing was pretty if the woman who wears it had a specially beautiful back. But supposing she has an ugly one—then where does the beauty come in?"

No one answered. Andreina went to her bed, turned back the covers and sat down on the bare mattress, looking at her hands coldly, attentively. Valentina, too, was a little awed by her sister's uncordial mood and held her peace. Standing at the head of the bed, she kept smiling and nodding reassuringly at the little girl, who was frightened and ill at ease. The constrained silence became oppressive. The professor seated himself and lifted Maddalena to his knees. He thought it was time for the child to come to the rescue and with her babyish innocence make an appeal to Andreina's hardened heart.

Laying a hand on the child's head, he remarked, unexpectedly, with a fatuously fond paternal pose:

"And this is Maddalena!" And he bent his bearded face over in front of the child and tried to look into her bashful eyes. "Tell us, Maddalena—do you know who this beautiful lady is? . . . Come now—that's a good girl! . . . Who is the beautiful lady?"

Lowering her head, and twisting one leg around the other in a complicated movement, the child seemed to be prey to a strong inner reluctance. Finally, in a slow soft whisper, as though the confidence were for her parent alone, she answered:

"I don't know who she is. . . . I want to go home. . . . Let's go home!"

"She's bashful!" interpreted Valentina, standing to one side with her hands thrust into her jacket pockets, and considering the family scene benevolently. "She's always that way with people she doesn't know. . . . At home she's the devil himself."

"But why don't you know who she is?" pressed the professor, with a teacherlike impatience. "Didn't we tell you over and over again? Didn't I tell you she's your sister? And you've forgotten already!"

Slyly the child had lifted her head part way so that she could see Andreina out of the corner of an eye. She may have had a confused remembrance of angry unkind things she had heard Valentina say about Maria Luisa, or she may have thought it impossible that a woman so beautiful, so stylish, so majestic, could be a sister of hers. Whatever the reason, she had a new and stronger attack of fear and discomfort.

"She isn't my sister!" she cried, petulant, nestling close against her father. "Tina is my sister! She's the marchesa!"

Though the words had been half-whispered, everybody heard them and each lent them a particular meaning. Pleased, but with a bitter pang, Andreina wrinkled one of her cheeks into a faint, asymmetrical smile. "The marchesa!" she reflected. "If only I were! Unfortunately, I'm just her sister!"

Valentina, however, had been in touch with Andreina all along. She knew of her affairs and her ambitions. She laughed good-naturedly.

"All the same, Andreina, they say innocence speaks truth. . . . She may prove right, some day. For my part, I believe her!"

His curiosity tickled by the child's assertive fancy, the professor kept trying to get his look into her eyes. He pried with a finger at the little chin Maddalena kept bashfully locked to her chest.

"What marchesa are you talking about!" he scolded. "This beautiful woman, Maddalena, is Tina's sister. She's your sister too. She's Andreina! There's no marchesa here."

"She's the marchesa," the child insisted, whimpering. "Let's go home! I want to go home!"

Andreina thereupon left her seat on the bed and stepped over to the little girl. The child's mistake had struck her at first with its painful irony, but then Valentina's remark about the clairvoyancy of childhood had impressed her, reviving in an irrational flash all her ambitious hopes. She thought of it, not exactly as the voice of God, but as a sign, an encouragement, born of chance, perhaps, but having a mysterious, providential significance for her, who expected everything of chance.

"Well," she said despondently, exchanging a knowing glance with her sister, "even if I were a marchesa, I wouldn't be much better off now."

But she knelt in front of her father, in order to bring herself to a level with the child, and in her turn tried to get a look at Maddalena's eyes.

"Tell me," she said in her hushed, cold, unaffectionate voice. "Why do you call me the marchesa? What makes you think I am? Come, Maddalena, tell me! How did you find out that I was the marchesa?"

"That's a good girl," encouraged Valentina in her turn. "Tell us! Why is she the marchesa and not your sister?"

But the child was unable to retrace the complicated journey by which her mind had arrived at that positive conviction. She was frightened, besides, at the pressure from three different directions. She ended by turning squarely around and clasping her father tight in her arms.

"Let's go home," she whimpered. "I want to go home."

"If this brat were mine!" thought Andreina, bored partly by the effort she was making to hold herself in her kneeling posture, and partly by the bad bringing-up that the child was manifesting. She felt no affection whatever for her little sister at just that moment.

But she controlled her temper, and decided to appeal from a different direction to the bashful child.

"Tell me, Maddalena! . . . If you do, I'll give you—a doll!"

A treacherous promise! Andreina had no dolls, and no intention of buying one. But her device was well calculated. The little girl looked around of her own accord.

"You'll give me a doll?" she asked, doubtful, but her face bright.

"Yes, a pretty doll!" repeated Andreina, coaxing.

"A big doll?" pressed the child, her doubt weakening.

"A big one—as big as you!"

A happy smile, as warm and glowing as a ray of unclouded sunlight, at last illumined the pale darkish face of the little girl. Yet, for some reason, she did not seem to become any more attractive. If anything, the unhappy ugliness of her waxlike cheeks and her too black, too expressive eyes was intensified.

"I know where to get the doll," she began, fluent, her trustful and rapid babble showing even better than her smile that her fear was gone. "There's a store right on our street." She wanted to add: "Will you really buy it for me?" But, from a remnant of bashfulness, and partly from remembering that such teasing always ended badly with her, she held her tongue. "If you buy me the doll," she concluded, for an honest bargain, "I'll tell you anything you wish."

Bent over on her knees, looking steadily into that now open, credulous face with the sad, unmoving eyes, Andreina repeated her question. She wanted the child to answer: "I said you were the marchesa because you are beautiful and noble-looking," or else: "I said you were the marchesa because you are dressed so beautifully." She wanted, in a word, an answer that would explain the mystery of the child's mistake in a sense favourable to herself, so strengthening her in her blind, irrational hope of some day becoming Matteo's wife.

But the child was reasoning in a different direction. Unable to recover the actual origin of her impression, remembering that Maria Luisa was usually mentioned in the family in unkind, invidious terms, and seeing so many grown people eager to have her say the right thing, it suddenly occurred to her that the title of marchesa, for reasons best known to grown-ups, implied something unpleasant and insulting, that therefore she had hurt Andreina without meaning to, and so ought to excuse herself and manifest her goodwill.

She smiled again, but this time with a quiet, artless bashfulness, showing just a trace of tiny, widely separated teeth between her lips. She laid a hand confidently on Andreina's shoulder and said:

"I made a mistake. You are good. The marchesa is bad. You are my sister."

Valentina and the father rustled in approval.

"There! You see?" said Valentina, beaming. "She's bashful, but when she's herself she talks like a grown person, exactly."

Andreina, crestfallen, rose without saying a word, stepped to the mirror, and looked at her cold clouded face, passing a hand across her forehead like a person beset with untold worries.

"It's time that child had something to eat," she said, without turning around. "Valentina, take her into the other room, and ask Cecilia. There must be cake or something left over from yesterday."

Valentina came forward and took the child by the hand.

"Come, treasure, let's go and see if there's some cake!"

But the child was not anxious to be led away. She had noticed the abrupt change from hope to disappointment on Andreina's face, and was puzzled. "I said she was my sister and not the marchesa," she reasoned after a fashion, "yet I seem to have hurt her again!" Worse that that, the doll seemed to have gone up in smoke! They had extorted that unfortunate remark from her, and now were backing out of their bargain! Why that? Frightened, worried, not venturing to resist, she still turned anxious eyes upon Andreina, half hoping the lady would suddenly cry: "But wait! I almost forgot! Here—here's the money for the doll!" half intending, by the mute, reproachful expression in her eyes, to show that she, at least, had not forgotten and so to force the woman to remember in her turn.

But Andreina had gone back to her seat on the bed and was talking with the father. It was not far from the bed to the door. With a vague heart-rending sense that she had been sacrificed to the mysterious calculations of people bigger than she, ready to burst into tears and murmuring sorrowfully to herself: "The doll? How about the doll as big as I am?" she kept her eyes glued to the beautiful lady; and knowing well that the imminent and insufficient sweetness of the piece of cake was to be small consolation for a disappointment so great, she let herself be dragged out of the room.

IX

THE moment the door had closed, Andreina turned towards her father, whose presence hitherto she had somewhat ostentatiously pretended to ignore, and, looking with frigid attentiveness at her hands, began:

"Now might one know just why you have come? I really had not been expecting a visit from you."

The professor combed his ten fingers through his beard like an orator beginning a speech, took his glasses from his pocket, adjusted them to his nose, and then looked at his daughter over the tops of them.

"Why not a visit from me? . . . Of course, in one way, you might have expected that I would never come. . . . There are points on which I refuse to compromise. . . . I said then, and I repeat now: When a daughter leaves her father's house to go and live with a man who is not her husband, for me she is finished, dead—she has ceased to exist."

"Yes," returned Andreina, icily cold, biting at a fingernail and looking everywhere except at her father. "So I can only repeat my question: Why did you come?"

"Let me finish!" corrected the professor. "It's true—you did that. You did leave home. It's true—you should have ceased to exist for me! . . . Yes, quite so! . . . But after all, you are my child—and blood is not water. And then again . . ." He softened his voice, opened his arms with the palms upturned, bowed his head, and added, humbly: "And then again, with a thought for that saint of a woman that your mother was, and who at this moment is certainly looking at us from up there"—he rolled his eyes towards the ceiling—"I said to myself, I said: 'Let's show her we know how to forgive and forget. . . . Let's go and see her. . . . Let's extend a hand to her . . . pass a sponge over everything that has happened.' . . . So I came."

Andreina sat motionless, bending a cold, profoundly disgusted face over a shoulder, and apparently giving her whole attention to the yellow cover on the bed. "So," she was thinking, angrily, "here I am in torment, struggling along, leading a miserable life, and my father comes and tells me that he forgives me!" Controlling her anger, she raised her head as he finished, and in her low hushed voice commented:

"If that was all you had to say, you might better have stayed at home."

The professor's hands sketched a gesture of shocked surprise and pain.

"What? That is the way you receive me after all that has happened—after all these years since we last saw each other?"

But Andreina was following a thread of resentful thoughts.

"Besides, when do you come? You come now, when I am better off and"—she was about to add: "when I am about to be married," but she restrained herself—"and when you think I can be useful to you. In the first days I had a hard time of it, and you knew it—through Valentina. Well, what did you answer? You answered that I had ceased to be your daughter, that you refused to have anything more to do with me."

The old man joined his hands and replied in a tone of entreaty:

"But, Andreina, think a little! How could I have helped you then? I was in trouble myself! On the one side, intrigues, enemies, persecution; on the other, three different people to support! Think of that, Andreina! Think it over carefully, and then tell me whether, in all conscience, I was in a position to help you. . . . For that matter," he added, "I would have come just the same, had I known anything about you. . . . But Valentina was at all times careful to keep me in the dark about everything. Yes, just that!" he explained, with a squint of conviction, stroking his beard. "Because, you see, there is a conspiracy against me in my own house—a conspiracy of silence. . . . No one keeps me posted, no one tells me anything! It's as though I did not exist. And in fact, how did I find out about you? By merest chance, through the Marchesa Tanzillo, Signor Davico's sister!"

Up to that point, Andreina had lent a distracted, inattentive ear to her father's chatter. She knew of long experience how little it corresponded to the facts. Sitting dreamily in front of him, with her head lowered, she had been waiting patiently for him to finish, lest any interruption on her part should supply him with a pretext for another long-winded discourse.

As a little girl she remembered that in walking along a path in the fields one day she had suddenly seen a snake uncoil almost under her feet and then glide away into some bushes. She had experienced at that time a sudden flash of instinctive, uncontrollable fear, accompanied by a sort of mental paralysis. That, now again, was the feeling that came over her when the professor pronounced Davico's name. At that time her whole body had reared in a terrified convulsion. Now it was only her head, which she threw back the way a horse throws back its head when it is hit on the nose, in a movement that was involuntary, spasmodic, and so violent that she could feel the shock in the joints between her backbone and her neck. Her face blanched. Her chest began to heave. She looked at her father. Her heart was pounding.

"What Davico?" she asked, in a barely audible gasp.

The professor had not observed the movement of her head, nor her commotion.

"Why, don't you know? I supposed Valentina had told you. We've been renting a room in order to make ends meet. Just now Signor Davico has it—Stefano Davico, the man who lived with us once when he was a student. You certainly knew him. In fact I remember that you and he were great friends. Fine-looking young man—tall, dark-haired, distinguished! Don't you remember? His name was Stefano—Stefano Davico."

A dark confusion had taken possession of Andreina. She could only look at her father and repeat to herself: "Stefano! Turned up again!" She could not have described her feelings. She felt as though her seducer's reappearance were a coincidence that she could only regard as the last and final blow of a fatality, ever more evident and recognizable, that had been persecuting her. Stefano's return could mean only that no hope was left for her, that ten years had passed in vain, that she was nailed to misfortune like a dead man's body spitted to a rock in the sea. With Stefano back, even marriage could not be considered a way out! What was left? Just blackness, the dark that she had known of old, and still knew too well!

"Where does the Marchesa Tanzillo come in?" she finally was able to ask.

That question did not fit in with the professor's plans.

"Why, she's his sister, of course! But now, Andreina, I don't want——"

"What is he back for?" the daughter interrupted, sharp, assertive, but none the less pensive.

"Trying to get well!" said the professor, not understanding her interest in the man, and anxious to get to the matter that interested him. "He's sick!"

"What's the matter with him?"

"Something to do with his bones!" answered the professor, ill-concealing his impatience. "Tuberculosis, I believe it is. Anyway, he goes around on crutches, and they say he's in a pretty bad way."

Andreina looked at her father, a sort of frenzied light glowing in her eyes. For ten years her soul had been storing up hatred against Stefano, whom she had little by little come to regard as the primary cause of all her unhappiness. That he should be so sick was of the greater delight to her in that she saw in his crippled state not only a sign that there was justice in the world, but a sign of weakness and harmlessness in a man whom she had reluctantly but inevitably thought of as a sort of hateful and redoubtable master.

"Oh, so he's on crutches!" she repeated. "Is he very lame?"

The professor pulled at his beard.

"Andreina," he began solemnly, in his classroom manner, greatly bored. "Don't expect me to go gossiping about people, or about matters that do not concern me. What do you care whether this boarder of ours is lame or not lame?"

"Don't worry about that!" answered Andreina, petulant, hard. "I have my reasons and they are no business of yours. Answer my question! Is he very lame?"

"But, Andreina, I told you that he is on crutches!"

Andreina's nostrils dilated. Her teeth came together. "So bad times have come for him too!" she thought. "I shall ruin myself certainly! He is already ruined!" She rose, prey to an uncontainable agitation, and took a few steps about the room.

"Tell me," she asked, stopping suddenly, "he is very much down in the mouth? Always complaining? Life hardly worth the living? He doesn't enjoy being a cripple, I imagine!"

"Now that, no!" exclaimed the professor, hopeless, raising his palms in utter disgust and shaking his head. "One has to agree that he takes his trouble philosophically, with great good humour, like a gentleman. He always was a well-bred young man, with a lot to him! . . . No, never complains, never disturbs us, always in good spirits! . . . Anybody else in his place would get tired of it, at the very least. . . . But he? Not he! He reads, plays the guitar, sings. . . . Couldn't be more cheerful! . . ."

In every word her father uttered Andreina could see the Stefano of long ago, and as her vindictive hope of hearing that he was suffering vanished, she lost the excitement that the hope had aroused in her. So there it all was, just as before: Stefano and his superiority, she and her unhappiness! Ten years had not altered anything! She sat down on the bed and took her head in her hands.

"But you came here for something, surely," she suddenly exclaimed, annoyed. "You would not have come without wanting something. Well, speak up! Tell me what you want, and be done with it!"

The professor hitched back in his chair, with an offended look. "Oh, so that's the way it is? I suppose a father can't call on his own daughter without being suspected of wanting something! . . . A fine thing, that! And I have to hear it from my daughter's own lips, at my age!"

Andreina felt weak, helpless, desperate. She could not refrain from casting an anguished glance at her father, in which anyone less self-centred than he could not have failed to observe a despondent suffering appeal. "If only he were somebody!" But the professor sat surveying her with the eye of a judge watching the effect of a sentence upon a prisoner. She again took her lowered head in her hands and murmured:

"Well, what is it you want?"

The professor stroked his beard and looked around. He was far too preoccupied with his own designs to notice the crushed demeanour of his daughter.

"I don't mean—" he began, mysterious, allusive, "I don't care to go prying into things that do not concern me. . . . That is not my habit. What your relations to the Marchese Tanzillo may be do not interest me in any way whatever—they do not exist for me. . . . But I have forgiven you. I have erected a headstone over the past. So, as a father, I have the duty—and I might say also the right—to take an interest in you. . . . That is why I have come—to see what there may be in certain rumours that have reached my ears of late concerning you. . . ."

"What rumours? What have you been hearing?" Andreina spoke in an impatient, depressed, exasperated tone. She did not move.

The professor leaned forward in her direction.

"This Signor Davico," he said, intense, half-whispering, "this boarder who has our room, is the Marchesa Tanzillo's brother. . . . Well, during a discussion with him that took place at our house, the sister declared at a certain point that she was about to procure an annulment. . . . After that I was told that once the annulment were obtained the marchese was going to marry you.

. . . Well, what I wanted to know is—what is the truth in all that?"

The old man's manner, his words, and tone of voice were so much at odds with Andreina's desperate frame of mind that, disconsolate, nervous, she did not know whether she was about to laugh or to weep. "What is he here for?" she wondered. "What is the meaning of all these questions? . . . What do I care now about Matteo's marrying me?" She raised her head a little.

"Yes, perhaps Matteo will marry me! Then again, perhaps he won't, and will go and be hanged! . . . What difference can it make?"

The professor opened wide two questioning frightened eyes. The girl's indifference seemed to him a weird, almost unnatural thing.

"What difference does it make!" he finally repeated. "A great idea! What difference does it make! Are you dreaming? You become a marchesa—rich! You enter an aristocratic family! That makes no difference? That's what I would call slamming the door in fortune's face." But he suddenly grew calm. "What difference it may make to you is of course your affair—you may have your reasons. . . . The important thing is that it's true. . . . Congratulations, therefore! Allow your father to congratulate you —most heartily!" He rose and shook Andreina's reluctant hand. Then he went and sat down again and began to stroke his beard. His attitude, and the expression on his face, indicated clearly that he was awaiting more detailed information.

But Andreina was in no mood to talk. Her father's curiosity and enthusiasm seemed to her remote, annoying, ironical things. Everything about her was crumbling into ruin, and here was this ex-schoolteacher, unperceiving, insensitive, interested in himself, coming to give her his congratulations! She bent forward and sat looking at the thick pink rug on which her feet were resting. Farther along she could see the tawny, glossy wood of the mahogany bureau and a segment of the mirror. She was thinking of herself as she had been as a child, with all the external marks of innocence that it sometimes pleased her to fancy that she had had as a little girl. Those memories, embellished probably by her present emotion, she was comparing with less happy ones of later days, and with her present desperate situation; and that same vindictive, distorted spirit that had led her to hope that Stefano would be ruined and suffering now made her think with hate of herself. "How could I ever have been such a fool!" she thought. "How could I ever imagine that I could have a home? . . . Stefano has come back just in time to remind me that there are illusions that I should not permit myself!" And now she cursed, not so much Stefano, as her own ambitious outlook. Born to the dark, why had she tried to escape into the light?

The professor leaned forward and touched her on a shoulder.

"You seem worried," he remarked. "Is the family objecting? Those aristocrats, you know . . ."

"No, no, no!" interrupted Andreina, at the limit of her endurance.

"Or is it," the professor ventured, "that you are frightened at the long time it will take to get the annulment? . . . A very proper and creditable anxiety! . . . But don't be afraid! . . . There's nothing, nowadays, that can't be hurried along with money! . . ."

"No, it's not that either!" snapped Andreina. "I am worried"—she hesitated, then decided to give some explanation or other that would relieve her of that irritating cross-examination—"I am worried because Matteo is going to be very poor after the annulment. He is rich now because his wife is rich, but the day the marriage is annulled, the money will vanish with the wife and he will be poor again."

"Oh, I see! . . ." the professor approved in his nasal tone, surprised. "I see. . . . But, after all, can a family as old as the Tanzillos be really poor?"

"They were rich once," answered Andreina, looking at her father from under her eyebrows. "Unfortunately, Matteo has gone through everything. In any case"—she was now more angry at herself than at her father—"what's the use of talking about it?

As far as I am concerned I just don't care anything about anything."

The professor rose and laid a hand on her forward-bent shoulder.

"No, no, my child!" he protested. "You mustn't get discouraged that way. We've got to think and see whether—but, really now, can it be that nothing of all those millions has stuck to the fingers of the Tanzillos?"

"The law is all with the wife," answered Andreina, as though she were reciting a lesson, without lifting her head from the hands in which it was resting or diverting her fixed dreamy gaze from the rug in front of her. "There's only one case where the husband gets anything—then it's a third of the wife's estate. . . ."

"So you see?" cried the professor, triumphant. "I told you so! The loophole is always there. . . . Yes, sir, one good lawyer is worth a bookful of laws!"

"You didn't let me finish," continued Andreina. "I said, there's only one case. That's where the wife dies."

"Oh, no, not that!" cried the professor, whose admiration for Maria Luisa was stronger even than his need or his greed. "I really couldn't hope for that! . . . Such a fine-looking woman? It would be a pity!"

A light glimmered in Andreina's eyes, but she looked down again, with her head in her hands and her elbows on her knees. She seemed to be thinking.

"There would be one other solution," she resumed, in an offhand tone. "Really, it would be the simplest of all! One might help her to die!"

"What do you mean by that?" asked the father, astonished, as though he were not certain that he had heard aright; and he looked at his daughter, perplexed, anxious.

"I mean, kill her!" answered Andreina, still with her head lowered, profoundly absorbed.

This time the professor was sure that he had understood correctly. His fingers clutched the arms of his chair as he leaned forward and fixed two eyes wide-opened in terror upon the girl before him. He made a gesture of bewildered horror.

"Don't say such things, even in jest!" he cried, leaping to his feet and beginning to pace the room. "Not even in jest! Dear me, what have we come to? People talk of killing, nowadays, the way they light a cigarette. I repeat, Andreina, I don't like such things even when they are said in fun. Dear me—kill her? Where are we living? Among the cannibals in Africa?"

Andreina reared under that rain of rebukes like a poisonous flower swelling turgid and quivering under a refreshing, harmless shower. She argued back, in a cold, monotonous tone, without raising her eyes:

"Don't you think that, everything considered, it would be an act of justice to kill a woman like Maria Luisa? Absurdly rich, she makes the worst possible use of her money. She lives in the best society and finds it a bore. She has reached middle age and is therefore old enough to know what she is about, yet she tampers with the morals of a boy like Carlino and makes him her lover. She has no character, no personality, no intelligence, no will. Neither good nor bad, she does not know what she wants or who she is. Her head is as empty as an inflated bladder. She does one thing today, and something different the day following. Her life has neither a head nor a tail. She muddles along in crazy lunges, looking for enjoyments and never finding them. Do you call that a person? I say that to kill such a woman would be the same as killing a mangy dog."

The father was dumbfounded. He halted his nervous promenade in the middle of the room and exclaimed: "Granted that all you say is true, or even truer than you make it out. There are still things that you shouldn't even think, let alone saying them! Do you mean to say that one can decide so lightly as to whether a person deserves to be put out of the way or not? Do you think it's decent even to consider such a question? And besides, at a moment like this, when you are thinking of marrying and founding a home and family! Andreina! Andreina!"

"But if Maria Luisa does not get out of the way," Andreina returned, cold, natural, "I will never be able to found the home and family you mention!"

"Yes," said the professor, sitting down again and shaking his head with a reasonable, unbiased expression that was intended to convey his bitterest sarcasm. "Why not? Why not? You are right, perfectly right! On the side of efficiency your proposal could not be better. I want to marry? I just put this person out of the way. I want to buy a house? I put that person out of the way. What a pretty little automobile! But to get it there's another person in my way! Yes, indeed! All very fine and practical! Tell me," he suddenly added, aghast, gesturing wildly with his hands and lowering his voice in sheer terror, "what sort of talk are you asking me to listen to? Luckily Maddalena is not here! What talk, what talk!"

Andreina suddenly fell from her bloodthirsty exhilaration into a black and moody despondency. Just so she had changed when the professor disappointed her vengeful hopes in the matter of Stefano's suffering. She bent forward very low again, clasped her hands about her head, and closed her eyes.

"Well, you suggest something to do!" she finally answered, without altering her posture. "You are great at talking! You just propose a way by which I can avoid poverty and still marry my marchese."

Reassured, the professor looked at his daughter, stroking his beard and pondering an answer to her challenge.

"Honesty is not a bad policy," he finally apophthegmatized, assuming his gravest professorial air. "Honesty, at any rate, is one of the few things that I do not consider open to discussion. . . . Even in the hardest moments of my life, when, in a sense, I would have been justified in doing as others do, my motto always remained: 'Poor but honest!' Yes, sir, I'm all of a piece, I am! What belongs to someone else for me does not exist. Hands off! That's why I have made myself so many enemies, and such bitter ones. . . . But there are special cases, cases where honesty is not involved. In such cases I should not hesitate. . . . Yes, because"—and the professor raised an admonishing finger—"well, it may be wrong to pick a pocket or rob a safe. That's dishonest. But it's not dishonest to take advantage of the property of one's own wife—especially when the wife is rich, and, as seems to be the case here, not a little frisky. Dear me, when I got married, I owed a few little things—not much, after all. But your mother was glad enough to give me her little dowry to pay them . . . and I never gave her back a cent—how could I with my wretched little salary as a teacher? Well, did she ever throw the loan in my face, or ask to be paid back? She didn't!"

Andreina was lost in dark thoughts of her own and seemed not to be listening to her father's ramblings.

"How about misleading a child of fourteen?" she suddenly asked. "Would that be honest or dishonest?"

The professor looked at her, astonished.

"What has that got to do with the case?" he asked, angry. "We were talking of Signor Davico's sister. . . . What has that got to do with her?"

Andreina held her eyes fixed upon the rug in front of her.

"I know a person who did that and was never punished," she volunteered.

"Yes, but what of that?" protested the professor again, bored, his face reddening. "There are all sorts of people that we come to know. . . . I once knew a man who bit off his wife's nose and was never punished. . . . But I don't introduce the story into every argument I happen to be engaged in. . . . What has it got to do with this case?"

"I was just thinking," said Andreina, without moving. "Go on—what were you saying?"

"Yes, I was saying"—the professor crossed his wrists and hung his thumbs from the two sleeves of his coat, looking at the ceiling—"what was I saying? . . . Oh, yes, well—to get an annulment, you have to have the husband's consent, don't you? Well, then, you see—all your friend Tanzillo has got to do is to tell his wife to hand over three, four, five millions, as the price *sine qua non* of his consent. The soup is served, madam! Eat it or jump out of the window! So she pays and there you are, married!"

"I have had enough of him," thought Andreina, making up her mind, disgusted, brusque. She was still certain that her father had not come just for a chat such as they had had. She raised her head and asked, dryly:

"Well, I'll remember your suggestion when the time comes. But for the present—what did you want? Was there something I could do for you—something you needed and that I could get? Tell me plainly."

The professor did not seem surprised at the change of subject.

"Andreina," he began, in his most earnest manner, "I gladly accept your invitation to speak plainly, and I tell you at once that things are going very badly with us. Just now we have Signor Davico in the house. If it weren't for that I don't know how we would get along. Every day there's some new expense, every day there's some income that fails. . . . I say nothing of the persecutions. . . ."

"What persecutions?" asked Andreina, with her mind quite elsewhere.

"Why, my enemies," he answered, "colleagues who are jealous of me, their intrigues. . . . If they could, they would rob me of the few lessons in Latin and Greek that have enabled me to get along after a fashion till now. Then, in addition, the children are growing up. Maddalena is still a child, to be sure. But there's Carlino, a grown man—with the appetite and the wardrobe of a grown man. Valentina ought to be thinking of finding a husband. Yes, to have a family these days is almost a luxury. . . ."

"Yes," interrupted Andreina, in her hushed voice, "I think I understand. If I am not mistaken, what you want is that I should contribute to the support of your family. . . ."

"Your family, too!" corrected the professor, worried.

Andreina pretended not to have heard.

"Well, now," she resumed, "if you want me to contribute towards your expenses, you must do me a favour in return. You and the others must not come and visit me here unless I specially ask you to. That," she softened, "is not because I dislike you, but for no end of reasons that I choose not to go into."

The professor had been holding his breath in his anxiety and chewing furiously at his moustache. He agreed warmly, as though a great weight had been lifted from his mind.

"Of course! Of course!" he cried. "Altogether reasonable! When you are married, you'll be in society. . . . All right and proper! . . ."

"You have the idea!" said Andreina, sarcastic, bitter. "When I'm married I'll be in society." She had again dropped into her mood of cold, black despondency. She sat motionless on the bed, her downcast eyes fixed on the floor.

"And for that reason," the professor hurried on, "you will have obligations towards yourself and towards others that you will have to live up to. . . . That is perfectly understandable. I'll tell Valentina at once. . . ."

"No, not Valentina!" Andreina interrupted, irritated. "Valentina has always come to see me. . . . Now you wait just a moment. . . ."

She rose and stepped with her leisurely majestic stride to her bureau. The professor watched her curiously. In that dark corner that nevertheless looked polished and bright from the light that the mirror gathered from the rest of the room, he saw her place herself close against the bureau as though to hide what she was doing, and then without bending over, carefully, circumspectly, open a drawer. She seemed to be trying to keep its contents hidden. In the faint yellowish light her evening gown took on the hard glossy blackness of a beetle's armour. She stood with her face away from him, her white back naked to the girdle. Below her waist, the garment seemed to sheathe her oblong thighs as in a shining metallic case, tapering off to two plump calves where a thick transparent lace draped her light-coloured stockings as in a funeral pall. She stood there for a moment and looked at herself absorbedly in the mirror, with the front of her body pressing against the outbillowing piece of furniture. At the same time she was fumbling about among the articles of clothing that the drawer contained. Finally she closed the drawer with a push of her body and turned around.

"Here!" she said, holding out a packet of twice-folded banknotes. "It's three hundred and fifty lire in all. It's a lot of money, for me," she added, calmly.

The professor's eyes flamed greedily. He extended a hand, but then unexpectedly drew it back and relapsed into his armchair.

"No, I can't!" he cried, sighing. "It's more than I can bring myself to do! I cannot take money that certainly derives from your future marriage. I can't! You know, it has always been that way with me. There was my colleague, Innamorati. Seeing that I was hard up, he offered me some money one day. 'I wish you had given me a slap instead of that!' I said to him."

"Well, you don't have to take it," said Andreina, annoyed, and she tossed the money upon a stand within reach of the professor's chair, then returned to the bureau and stood with her back against it, facing him.

There was silence for a moment. Finally the professor seemed to be seized with a strange agitation. He reached out a hand towards the stand and scattered the banknotes about with the ends of his fingers, meanwhile trying not to look at them.

"That's right!" he then observed, with a worried air, pushing the money back as though it were a criminal temptation. "There's three hundred and fifty lire! Money that you would certainly spend on frivolities, clothes, perfumes, while your father and your family are trying to drag along till the end of the month!"

"It is there for you!" repeated Andreina, cold, detached, without moving or raising her eyes. "Take it!"

The professor looked at the stand with a feverish expression and pulled at his beard. However, he did not take the money.

"There's no denying it," he began again. "It does shock one to see certain inequalities. On one side, a schoolteacher who barely manages to get along by giving lessons and renting a room, while his daughter works out as a nurse! On the other side, opulence—evening gowns, automobiles, gay parties, where they drink, laugh, and dance, spending more money in ten minutes than would be required to keep a family like mine for a month. . . ."

"You refuse to take it?" asked Andreina, dryly. "Then I'll put it away again." She picked up the money and started as though to return it to the drawer.

The professor seemed to be worried, but he sat with his head still lowered, pulling frantically at the ends of his moustache. Finally he looked up furtively, eagerly, at his daughter.

"Wait!" he cried, raising a hand.

"Well?" answered Andreina, turning slowly.

"I'll take it!" he said. "But it must be on one condition."

"Well?" repeated Andreina.

"You must assure me that you will never have to account for that money to anybody else and that no one will ever hear of my taking it."

Andreina frowned.

"I can promise that," she said, wearily.

"I can be sure?"

"You can be sure."

The professor shook his head disconsolately as he put the bills into his pocketbook.

"It's only a drop in the bucket. We are two months back in the rent alone. But it all helps—it all helps! Thank you, Andreina! This is really an act of kindness on your part. . . . You could not have shown your devotion to your family in a better way."

Patiently Andreina allowed those waves and billows of gratitude to pass over her. Still standing with her back to the bureau, she seemed to be thinking.

"I wonder," she finally interrupted. "Perhaps now you would do me a favour. You said that that Davico person was boarding with you at present—and, by the way, why is it that Valentina never told me about him?"

"Well, it's this way," said the professor, important, mysterious, "Signor Davico is a very fine sort of person and I think—well, I think Valentina has been a little taken with him. . . . In that case she probably did not mention him because—well, you can see—she may have been afraid that if he were to see you again he might fall in love with you."

Andreina stood thoughtful for a moment. Valentina had long known of her childhood adventure with Stefano, and she readily guessed why Valentina, fond of her and apprehensive, had refrained from any allusion to her seducer's return. But she was weary now, and in her tired mind ideas could not keep themselves distinct. "Afraid he might fall in love with me!" she repeated mentally several times before she really grasped the meaning of the words. Finally she said, aloud:

"Well, do me the favour then. If Signor Davico should ever inquire after me, or even"—she hesitated—"or even if he doesn't, give him my address and ask him to come and see me."

"I will do so gladly," replied the professor. "He has asked Valentina for your address—well, many times!"

"Oh, so he asked for it many times!" repeated Andreina, and her emotion was so great that she feared she was about to faint. She closed her eyes and stood there, now and again shaking her head bitterly. "Tell me," she finally asked, "does anyone ever come to see him—a woman, I mean?"

"No woman, that I know of."

Andreina shook her head again, biting her lips. In the old days Stefano had given her to understand that he had turned to her because he had no other women. So now again he would be turning to her—as a convenience, for lack of better!

"Tell him," she finally added, "to come about this time of day when I am more likely to be alone."

"Very well—agreed!" And the professor gave a lavish gesture with his hand. He rose, stepped to the window, raised the curtain, and looked down into the street. "A good district to live in!" he commented, without turning around. "A little out of the way, perhaps, but distinguished, attractive!"

He did not have time to finish. The doorbell rang.

"It's Matteo!" cried Andreina, alarmed. "Quick! You must go! I don't want him to see you here!"

She reached for her father's hat, thrust it into his hand, and pushed him out into the corridor and thence into the kitchen.

Though night had not yet fallen, the white-enamelled blinds had been closed and the central light turned on in the little room, drawing a bright reflection from each of the small polished tiles that covered the walls. Three persons were sitting around the marble-topped table—Valentina, little Maddalena, and the maid Cecilia. The two women were talking. Seated on an ordinary chair, the child was struggling with a cup of coffee, much diluted with milk, which stood too high for her on the table-top. They were all startled by the abrupt entrance of Andreina and the professor and turned in surprise towards the door.

"Quick!" said Andreina, closing it behind her. "Matteo is here. . . . Get them out of the house, Cecilia—through the window!"

"I don't suppose you are used to leaving houses by the windows!" said Cecilia to Valentina, familiarly, amused. "Well, there's not much to it! You see, we're on the ground floor!"

She stepped to the window and threw the blinds open. In the faint light of a winter's twilight, the naked wall of the garden appeared and, beyond it, a house of uncertain colour, between red and brown, which from its nearness closed the view in that direction. All the windows in the building were shut, except one, and in that an electric light was gleaming, emphasizing through the halo of darkness around it the approach of night.

A cold draught of air swept into the warm kitchen.

"Brr . . . how cold it is!" said Valentina, buttoning her own coat tight about her, and struggling with the curly moufflon collar of Maddalena's cape to bring it more warmly about the child's throat. "Come, treasure! We're going home!"

But the child had a good memory, and she had been too often tricked by such expressions of tenderness on her sister's part. She slipped quickly from her chair and clung to Valentina's skirt, lifting an appealing face from between the wings of her high wool collar.

"The doll! . . ." she implored.

"What doll?" asked Valentina, inattentively. "We're going home, treasure! Let's hurry! . . . Good-bye, Andreina!" And she approached her sister and kissed her on the cheek.

"The doll! My doll!" whimpered the child, following her like a lapdog vainly capering and whisking about in an effort to win its master's attention. She pulled now at the dress of Andreina, now at Valentina's coat.

"The doll! I want my doll!"

When it seemed that the farewells were over, she frankly reached out her two little hands to pull at the garments of the two women at once, lifting her face and crying quite aloud:

"The doll! Where is the doll you promised me?"

"What doll?" asked Andreina, knowing perfectly well what doll, but with no remotest intention of keeping her promise.

"No, no!" admonished Valentina, bending over to speak into the child's face. "There are no dolls here, treasure! We'll get one outside—a big one, as big as you are! . . . Come now, we must hurry. . . . We're going home!"

The departure through the window was awkward and noisy; Cecilia, amused, hardly able to restrain her mirth; Andreina, worried, impatient, cold; the child, utterly disappointed, whimpering inside her high moufflon collar. The professor led the way, addressing himself to the window in his most stately and dignified manner, clutching the sill with his two hands, then letting himself down to the ground, with his mouth and two eyes opened wide. Valentina took the whimpering Maddalena in her arms and passed her bodily to the father. Then she mounted a chair, stepped to the window-sill, and with a merry leap and a little cry was on the ground, her father arresting her momentum with his arms. The three waved to Andreina, then rounded the house, and went out through the gate into the street.

It was all but dark. A blanket of thick, black, tormented cloud hung low over all the landscape, over the river that wound luminous between its granite dikes, over the buildings of the myriad windows that crowded the opposite shore, and, beyond the bridge, over the jumbled, misty rooftops and towers of the city. Among the naked trunks of the linden trees along the river, the first street lamps were glowing red in the smoky air of twilight. Only a few pedestrians were in sight. Suddenly the bells on the baroque church began to crash with a brazen, acid furiousness, calling the faithful to sunset prayer, driving from mossy cornices the flocks of pigeons that nested there, and sending them in a long flight across the river till they were lost to view in the glare of the sunset under the clouds.

The father, the woman, and the little girl made their way along the deserted avenue past the line of iron gates and villas. The whimpering child lagged behind, and a frequent pull from the father's arm was necessary to keep her abreast of the other two. The woman bent over now and again to admonish the little girl. Finally they reached a corner, turned into the side street, and disappeared.

X

CECILIA had hardly closed the kitchen windows when the bell rang again with an extravagance that betrayed the impatience of the visitor—first one ring, then three short ones, finally one that was very long. The maid was clearing away after Maddalena's little refreshment. She shrugged her shoulders.

"In a hurry, I should say!" she commented gaily. "Well, try to keep warm by chasing yourself!"

Andreina had been standing with her back to the window-sill, gazing absently at the table on which Maddalena's cup stood all by itself, casting a cone-shaped shadow upon the marble top. She seemed to be deep in thought. The second ring brought her to her senses.

"What?" she cried sharply to Cecilia. "You haven't answered yet? Quick—go see who it is! If it's Signor Monatti," she called after the hurrying maid, "tell him to go to my room."

Left alone, Andreina went to the stove and considered a dish of milk that was simmering on a lowered gas flame. The dish was of a light-blue enamel, showing spots of black greasy iron where the enamel had come off. The milk had frothed high, without quite overflowing the edge of the pot. Thence her eyes moved on to two books that lay on the cooling-shelf. Half mechanically, half in idle curiosity, she picked them up and looked at them. Both belonged to the same low-priced series, printed on a cheap shiny paper. One was called *Eternal Chains* and the other *Feet of Clay*. She opened *Eternal Chains*. It had numerous illustrations, and as she began looking for them one arrested her attention. It showed, standing in the middle of a luxurious drawing-room, a woman dressed in a long stiff skirt and a waist with leg-o'-mutton sleeves and a high collar, in the style of 1890, or earlier still. A man with an incredibly long moustache, a corseted coat, and striped trousers had seized her by a wrist and was pointing to a third person, who was standing some distance away. "Wretched woman," ran the caption, "do you know this man?"

Andreina pondered the scene a moment, then closed the volume and laid it back in its place.

The door opened and Cecilia came in again.

"It wasn't Signor Monatti," she reported. "It was a boy. I couldn't make out what on earth he wanted."

Andreina looked at her without answering and left the room.

She found the outside door open and on the threshold, in fact, a boy, twirling his hat in his hand. He seemed to be about twelve, rather thin, with blond close-cropped hair, a pale, not very intelligent face, a too prominent forehead, and a ragged mouth with thick red lips—one of those mouths that seem to promise nothing but insolence.

"What is it?" she asked. "What do you want?"

"Is Signora Andreina in?" asked the boy in his turn, half eating his words.

Andreina did not understand.

"What did you say?"

"I said is Signora Andreina in?" the boy repeated, looking at her out of bold, astonished blue eyes.

Andreina leaned against the doorjamb.

"I am Signora Andreina," she replied quietly, not really knowing why her heart began to beat so furiously.

The boy swept her with another of his insolent glances, then, without a word of explanation, turned and fled.

Understanding that something further was to happen, Andreina remained as she was in the open doorway, gazing expectantly into the empty, lighted hall.

Her apartment opened into a deep wing that extended from the left of the main entrance. She could not see the entrance itself, nor, through it, any part of the garden. Her view was confined to the stairway as it made a turn with its black balustrade up towards the floor above. Sounds from the garden, and even from the street beyond, were nevertheless plainly audible. And in fact, before very long, she heard the gate close and then the crunching of footsteps on the gravelled path.

"Some nuisance or other!" she thought, not at all convinced, feigning a yawn, and gazing with falsely indifferent eyes at the red and black tiles on the floor of the main vestibule. The steps came nearer. Now she was struck by their irregularity and slowness, and by the recurrence at intervals of a heavy thud that sounded like the noise of a cane, and the cane seemed to be carrying the full weight of a body.

The steps passed the first tread on the outer flight of three, then the second, then the third. Finally, around the corner made by the wing, the blond, close-cropped head of the boy appeared. An arm dressed in a light suit was thrown about his shoulders. Then with a lowered head, carefully watching where he put his feet, his face red from his long effort, resting his weight partly on his youthful escort and partly on his cane, Stefano Davico came into view.

She recognized him at once, despite his infirmity and his fatness. Her face blanched. She could feel her knees weakening, her breath coming short. She drew back a little inside the door and stood looking at him. She observed that one of his legs was shorter than the other and that his feet, which had always been small, seemed wholly inadequate for carrying the weight of the great body that rose above them.

Arriving in the middle of the hall, Stefano gave a deep sigh of relief, but looked anxiously at the stairs, asking the boy how many flights they had to climb. The boy contented himself by pointing at Andreina, who stood, more dead than alive, half hidden behind her door.

Stefano worked himself around, discovered her, and smiled quietly, jovially, as though they had seen each other, not ten years, but ten days before.

"Oh, Andreina!" he called, waving a hand in greeting. Then as fast as he could on his two unsteady supports, he made his way towards her. "Well, how goes it?" he continued, with a pant, reaching for Andreina's inert hand and shaking it.

However, Stefano did not lose his sense of realities in these festive formalities. He got a hand into a pocket, extracted a coin, and handed it to the boy. The boy took it, turned, and ran, without a word of thanks.

"I haven't my crutches," he explained, in a tone so sure of itself that it did not even command. "Let me lean on you."

Andreina had not spoken a word as yet. She offered her shoulder and they entered the apartment.

Andreina closed the outside door and then said, pointing to the parlour:

"This way."

At every step they took, Stefano's arm seemed to her to grow more heavy, more clawlike, more possessive. She kept her head lowered, biting at her lips, breathing deep through her quivering nostrils, striving hard to control the relentless sense of rebellion that his touch inspired. The bewildered confusion that she had at first experienced had now given way to loathing and cruelty.

Quite different had been the course of Stefano's thoughts. Though he took care not to show as much, Andreina's beauty had made a devastating impression on him. "And I should give up a woman like this," he reflected, "to please the first Monatti that comes along! Does he think I'm an idiot?" The violent, overwhelming desire that that gorgeous feminine creature aroused in him was reinforced, moreover, by a subtler provocation, a vivid, too vivid, recollection of their old relations. What a rare, and what a cruel delight, he thought, and at the same time what a consolation to his vanity, to possess, experienced and mature, the woman whom he had forcibly possessed ten years before as a child—possess her in spite of the years that had passed, in spite of her resentments, her reluctance, her ideals—in spite of Monatti! But, as he recognized at once, he would now encounter more serious obstacles than he had that other time. Andreina certainly hated him. She was not fourteen any longer. She was in love with Pietro. How go about it then?

As he rested his full weight on her shoulder and pretended to be examining the apartment, Stefano was asking himself which of two methods was the better for overcoming Andreina's unwillingness. Should he go straight to the point, revealing his intentions immediately, relying on the chance that her old sense of servitude could be revived? Or should he try her on the side of sentiment, flatter her, stir her, allure her, so bringing her by imperceptible degrees to do his will? "There's no doubt that her sensuality must be something extraordinary," he reflected, still leaning on her naked shoulder, but darting a rapid appraising glance along her superbly erect figure. "Once she is started, there will be no stopping her. But then again, if what Monatti tells me is true, she must have grown up to be one of your sentimental women who take everything on a tragic note, give themselves no end of airs, and imagine that their lives are stuffed with drama. That, come to think of it, was Monatti's approach. He is a shrewd one! I do believe the wisest course would be to follow him."

Andreina guided the cripple to the divan, freed herself deftly of his arm, and made him sit down. Then, at her leisurely complacent gait as of a walking statue, she stepped to the door, turned off the centre light, and went back to her visitor. This double promenade across the whole length of the room, executed with a practised slowness that was designed to give full value to every one of her ravishing lines, brought Stefano's excitement to a climax. "What a girl, oh, what a girl!" he murmured, half in torture, to himself, as, erect and pale in her black gown, she moved majestically about the darkened room.

It was therefore without a trace of rhetoric or calculation that he exclaimed, the moment she was seated beside him:

"How things have changed—but you most of all! Why, do you know, I'm almost afraid of you! I couldn't trot you on a knee now, as I did in those days, or at least"—he added, for a first allusion—"at least, not without effort. They told me you had become a beauty—you were even then. But I must confess, in all sincerity and without trying to pay compliments—compliments would be out of place between us two, don't you think?—I must confess that I find you far more beautiful than I had ever foreseen."

Andreina nodded a mechanical acknowledgment that was quite free of irony, as though to say: "Very kind of you!" But meanwhile she was surveying Stefano up and down, and she could not be sure that her hatred did not contain, if not a remnant of love, at least an element of horrified and impotent subservience. Would she have to admit, after all, that in ten years' time she had not been able to free herself of that violent and deadly mastery?

"You too have changed," she replied, pointing to his shortened leg.

Stefano's eyes had been playing, with an avid, unctuous satisfaction, over Andreina's beautiful shoulders and her broad ample chest. They suddenly changed expression and dropped upon his own body.

"Oh, yes," he remarked, indifferently, "this trouble of mine! I have been sick, that's true. But now, thank Heaven, the worst is over! The doctors tell me I shall soon be well again and getting around as spryly as anybody."

Andreina's nostrils quivered.

"I'm sorry," she said, acid, calm, without thinking. "I had hoped you were seriously ill."

She repented of the remark the moment she had proffered it. Would it not have been better to show complete indifference? Was hatred not often the evident sign of a love that had been real and might still be surviving?

Stefano was taken aback by her words and for a moment paused. "She hates me, she really does!" he thought, annoyed. But he did not lose heart. He resolved to make every effort, especially on the false, sentimental plane where he thought Andreina would be most responsive, to overcome, or at least to anæsthetize, her hatred, and arrive in spite of it at his goal.

"So you really hate me—very much?" he asked, in a plaintive, hesitant tone that was only half affected. "You hate me like that, after all these years?"

Andreina felt a sudden catch in her throat, and her lips quivered. She dropped her eyes in order to hide the tears that were gathering in them.

"Yes, I hate you," she replied, in a half-whisper. "I hate you."

Stefano did not miss the intonation of sorrow that rang in her words. He did not know, nor care to find out, the nature and meaning of the lament, but he did guess that in it Andreina's weakness lay, along with his best chance of succeeding.

"I am very sorry," he said, softly, trying to give his voice a caressing, insinuating, contrite ring. "I am really sorry, Andreina, that you still have such rancour towards me. All the more," he added, showing a sudden warmth and seizing her hand, "since I have suffered bitterly myself over what happened then, suffered more than you, perhaps. Because, you see—yes—remorse is much harder to bear than the other consequences. Then again, the moment I saw you, I could not help feeling towards you exactly as I felt ten years ago."

Andreina did not raise her head. She merely gazed at the hand that had taken possession of hers. Her heart was beating in short sharp leaps. She could hardly draw her breath.

"What do you mean by that?" she murmured.

"I mean," said Stefano, stirred, persuasive, edging nearer to her and moving his hand to her wrist and then up along her naked arm, "I mean that I love you the way I loved you then—more than I did then."

She made no answer. Her head was empty. All her terrified, fascinated vitality had fled to her eyes, and they could not free themselves from that soft, persuasive touch that was moving along her arm.

For a time Stefano seemed exclusively concerned with ruffling and smoothing out again with the soft caress of his fingers the trace of down that darkened Andreina's arm. Finally he resumed:

"You must not imagine that I do not understand your hating me, and that in a way I do not approve of it. I behaved very badly towards you, I know. But as I said, I have suffered for it, suffered terribly, and my one wish would be to be able to go back over all that and repair in some way the harm I did you. I may be mistaken, of course, but somehow I can't believe that you have ceased to love me. You do love me, Andreina darling, let me tell you that you do. . . . So then, if you love me and I love you, why should we pretend? What has been has been! Let's speak no more of it. Let's forget! Let's be as sincere with our feelings as we once were. We are both ruined—I in my way, you in yours. . . . Now," he added, looking at her steadily in order to measure the effect his argument was having—he did not see how he could fail with a person like her, "now we must go back and begin a new life together. Who knows? Sustaining each other, compensating for each other's weaknesses, forgiving our mutual wrongs, helping each other to forget the past, couldn't we succeed in making a new life together? . . . What do you say, eh, little girl?" Dropping her arm, he took her lowered chin between the thumb and fingers of his hand. "What do you say?"

Motionless, holding her head down, and ruminating the words of her one-time lover like a sweet grass that gradually acquired an oily nauseating savour in her mouth, Andreina seemed not to be aware of the contact of his fingers. That encouraged Stefano still more. He thought he might venture a touch upon her neck and then on her breast.

His fingers were already groping their way towards those goals when a sudden frenzied light flashed in Andreina's eyes.

"Let me alone!" she cried, most unexpectedly, throwing him off with a desperate furious push. Then, as she looked at him, she broke into a loud sarcastic laugh. "A new life with you—rotting in your bones, rotting in your body, to say nothing of your soul! A new life with you! . . ."

She laughed, but then suddenly became very grave again and sat looking at him with sparkling eyes, pale, silent, motionless.

In promoting his seduction Stefano had leaned over to one side. Her movement had been so vigorous that he lost his balance and fell back, striking his head heavily against the wall. Physical shock, therefore, came to reinforce the angry certainty he now felt that he had lost his power over the girl. His excitement turned to a cold hatred that deliberately sought its means of revenge. As he rubbed his aching head and affected a nonchalant smile, he tried to think of the most expeditious way of making Andreina pay for her violent rebuff. He found at last a sentence that satisfied him. It contained an insulting allusion to their old affair.

He was about to proffer it, when the door opened and Cecilia entered the room.

XI

Her hips swaying, her eyes lowered, humble, servile in manner, the maid approached the two on the divan.

"Signor Monatti is here!" she whispered to Andreina, bending over towards her and at the same time surveying Stefano with a curious, steady, unflinching gaze. "And that young lady is with him—the Marchese Matteo's sister."

The call filled Andreina with a gay, convulsive excitement.

"Just in time!" she cried. "Show them in—at once!"

"The Tanzillo girl?" asked Stefano, as the maid retired. He lifted himself to a sitting posture, disconcerted. "That would be Monatti's fiancée?"

"Yes, Monatti's fiancée!" answered Andreina, standing erect in the middle of the room and looking now at the door, now at Stefano.

"Shall I stay?" asked the latter, without moving. "Or would you rather have me go away?"

Andreina gestured impatiently, nervous.

"You must stay—of course! You have to! Otherwise what's the fun?"

The door swung open and Sofia and Pietro entered.

At sight of Stefano the young man frowned darkly. "Devil take the fellow!" he thought, fiercely. "Who knows what he has gone and told her! A pretty state I shall find her in!" But his decision to break with Sofia and marry Andreina gave him a sense of irresistible, far-seeing strength. Since he had mastered himself, he was certain that in the end he would master his recalcitrant mistress. As for Stefano, he had no fears. It would be a simple matter to pitch him into the street, or simply beat him beyond recognition. He therefore pretended not to notice the jeering smile that the cripple bestowed upon him, as though to say: "So you see I got here without my crutches, and I am busy stealing your girl!" Instead Pietro looked at Andreina, anxious to discern any effects that their encounter on the drive, or Stefano's visit, had had on her. He concluded that he had never seen her face so pale, nor had he seen such a strange glitter in her black eyes. Another thing that struck him was her evening gown. Worn at that hour, with her pallor, her manner of silent frenzy, her dishevelled hair, it lent her a strangely melodramatic professional air.

Meanwhile the two women had exchanged greetings and were approaching the divan.

"And this," said Andreina, pointing to Stefano and looking at the girl intently from under her eyebrows, "this is a very dear friend of my childhood days. Signorina Tanzillo—Signor Davico!"

Stefano reached out and took the girl's hand, pointing to his paralysed leg as his excuse for not rising.

There was a brief silence. All four sat constrained. But of the four, certainly, Sofia was the one who had the least reason for her embarrassment and the least understanding of it. Her first superficial enthusiasm for Andreina had long since cooled. She had no particular fault to find with the girl, except perhaps a certain coldness and lack of cordiality that she found it hard to fathom. At the same time, whenever she had seen her since their first meeting, she had been conscious of an ever-growing discomfort as at a relationship that was false in itself and had never had any real reason for existing. That feeling was sharpened on this occasion by the presence of Stefano, so fat, so evidently a cripple, and so clumsily attired in his bright-coloured sporting suit. But there too was Andreina in her extravagant attire and with that strange wild look in her eyes! "Something has been going on here!" thought Sofia. "Or else something is going to happen." As she looked at the two a frightened sense of physical repugnance, of being out of her proper social element, overcame her curiosity, and she would have been glad enough for a pretext that would have permitted her to rise and take her leave.

Sofia's state of mind did not escape Pietro, and thinking it largely due to Andreina's disorderly appearance, he tried to find a justification for her.

"You are pale," he began, turning to Andreina. "Are you sure you are quite well?"

Sofia had made herself comfortable on a low hassock. She turned in approval.

"I was about to say the same thing! She is very pale—too pale."

She saw Andreina give a little start and then slowly pass a hand, with the fingers wide apart, over her face.

"It's my sheer joy!" she said at last, in her hushed voice, significantly grave, with a pointed glance at Stefano. "It is my very great joy at again seeing this very dear friend of my girlhood."

Her tone had been too bitter and too emphatic for the others not to divine its ironical intent. The embarrassed constraint in the company was therefore doubled. Andreina herself paused, gazing at her visitors one after the other with steady flaming eyes.

"Perhaps you wonder why I am dressed this way at five in the afternoon," she suddenly resumed. "It's easily explained. I put this on in order to receive more worthily this dear friend of my girlhood."

Pietro sighed, in utter dismay, and looked at the floor in front of him. Stefano too lowered his eyes. Sofia, however, met the woman's gaze with an attentive, uncomprehending ingenuousness, as though trying to make certain that it was Andreina, and no one else, who was talking in that manner. Andreina, for her part, seemed to be thinking. She kept passing her hand over her face.

"Besides, Sofia," she again exclaimed, "Signor Davico is a relative of yours. He is your sister-in-law's brother!"

Sofia had not clearly grasped who the man was, nor even his name. Now that she knew, her diffidence and discomfort increased. Relationship to Maria Luisa was not a recommendation in her eyes, to begin with. But her sister-in-law had always referred to this Stefano in terms so reticent and so apologetic that the least suspicious person in the world would have acquired some doubts concerning him.

"Oh, yes," she said simply, looking at him almost in fear, "my brother's wife has often spoken of you."

Stefano was not displeased with the identification. He smiled and was about to say something. But Andreina interrupted.

"I introduced Signor Davico to you," she said, addressing Sofia, "as a very dear childhood friend. But that is not half the story." She looked at Stefano steadily. "That you may fully understand the sort of person he is, and so become yourself his friend, I must tell you all that he did for me. To him, in the first place, I owe my education."

A noise broke her off. Stefano had leaned awkwardly forward to reach a cigarette on the stand. His cane had fallen to the floor. As the only one seated on the divan, he was the only one to have the light from the lamp full upon his glossy, disconcerted face, his nervous hands, his crippled, badly dressed body, while the others were seated about him in semi-darkness. It was evident that in spite of his habitual self-possession this focusing of attention upon himself was beginning to get on his nerves.

"Have a cigarette, Andreina!" he proposed with a somewhat anxious nonchalance, holding out the box and fixing a significant imperious gaze upon her. "Don't persist in boring Signorina Tanzillo with such stale reminiscences. They cannot possibly interest her in any way."

He held his position, with the arm vainly extended. His face was red and puffy.

"So you see?" exclaimed Andreina, still addressing Sofia. "Notice how modest he is! He is trying to change the subject in order to prevent me from going on. He doesn't want me to tell people of all the great things he did, nor mention all the gratitude I owe him. However, I am going to talk. No one can prevent me!"

She laughed, then became grave again, and looked around at her companions as though assembling her memories before putting them into words.

But the furious staring glint in her normally so expressionless eyes had frightened Pietro.

"Davico is right!" he interposed, his face reddening; and his blush became still deeper as Sofia turned and looked at him. "Why go into all those things? Besides, even if there were a reason, we would not have time to listen to it. . . . We have to be going."

Andreina laughed in a wholly new tone, as though she were utterly bent on spilling blood.

"You are going to sit right where you are!" she declared, aggressively. "And you are not going to talk. Otherwise I shall be obliged to tell what I owe to you, as well as what I owe to Signor Davico."

She laughed again, looking defiantly around at the company. This time no one dared to gainsay her.

For a moment she seemed to savour the consternation and embarrassment she had succeeded in spreading around the room. Then turning to Sofia and parodying the intonations and attitudes of society conversations, she continued:

"What were we saying? Oh, yes—my education! Well, you must know that as a child—it may have been because my parents were too poor to provide me with a good education, or in fact with any education at all, or it may have been because I was born that way—in any event, as a child, I was a regular little savage, ignorant, uncouth, uneducated. At the time, Signor Davico was a boarder in our house, and he had taken an interest in me from the first. But when one is studying at the university—busy, you know, and all that—the way such things go—a man has little time to devote to a girl fourteen years old. But my chance was to come. Davico fell on the ice and broke his leg and was therefore obliged to stay indoors for week after week. It became my task to relieve the tedium of his long days, so I kept him company, and he began to pay serious attention to me. I am willing to grant—as he, over-modest, kept reminding me—that he did what he did as a mere pastime. But that has never diminished my gratitude by one jot! In fact, quite the contrary! He began to take an interest in me, as I said, at first somewhat superficially, but then, later, more in earnest, then, finally, seeing that it was really worth his while, with a deep and persistent assiduity. He showed me things I never knew before, gave me an education no one had ever dreamed of giving me, taught me most of what I have learned down to now, and outlined a programme of conduct to which I have more or less adhered ever since. In a certain sense I may say that if I am what I am today, I owe it to Signor Davico. It was he who trained me and gave me my start."

She paused, choking suddenly from the violence of her emotion. Her eyes were shining, her breast heaved visibly, and at each breath her whole body shook.

In his shame, that had its part of hate, Pietro did not know what to do with his eyes. With her hat on the back of her head and her curls dangling down over her eyes and cheeks, Sofia sat looking at Andreina, open-mouthed, in terrified fascination. Stefano was too directly concerned to allow his feelings to transpire. He was the only one to maintain a sort of calm.

"As usual you exaggerate," he commented with an acrid, resentful coldness. "What you have said is true only in very small part."

Sofia's stupefied eyes darted from the woman's face upon the cripple.

"I am not exaggerating at all," answered Andreina. Then turning towards Sofia again, she resumed: "You be the judge! Any other man in his place—well, what would he have done? Either he would have paid no attention to me, or else—seeing that this world is full of rascals—finding me alone with him, trustful, and after all older than my years, he might have yielded to some brutish temptation. But Signor Davico didn't—not he! He took what I might call a fatherly interest in me. . . ."

There was the noise of a chair grating on the floor. All eyes turned upon Pietro. He had suddenly risen.

"I find myself obliged to interrupt this pleasant conversation," he said. "I shall have to be leaving very soon, and I think it will be better if I show the Contessa Caracci the papers I have brought —a little matter of business we have to transact together."

"Business together?" asked Stefano, quite self-possessed. "You two playing the market?"

"Yes, just that!" nodded Pietro. "We're playing the market!" But Sofia had turned around on her hassock and was now looking at her fiancé with the same terrified, uncomprehending eyes that she had formerly fixed upon Andreina and Stefano. "Perhaps, therefore," he continued, "the countess will be so good as to step into the next room with me."

He turned curtly towards the door. Andreina hesitated a second and then, with an abrupt movement, rose and followed him.

The hall outside was dark. Andreina turned on a light and closed the parlour door.

"What's the matter? What do you want?" she asked.

There was fire in Pietro's eyes. He seized Andreina by the wrist.

"Why did you tell all that rubbish to Sofia?"

"What rubbish?"

"All that about you and Stefano! Why did you let him in, in the first place? Why didn't you send him away?"

Andreina seemed at last to understand. She broke into a listless, discouraged laugh.

"Oh, so you know all about it! Who told you? Stefano, of course! Why don't I send him away? Why, because he fits in very well here! This is an ideal place for him! Besides, what good would it do to send him away now? Everything is finished. Why did I tell all that to Sofia? You must have seen—to have my fun with her!" Again she laughed, half lost her balance, as though she had drunk too much, lowered her head, and rubbed her eyes with a hand.

Pietro looked at her frowning, without releasing his hold on her wrist. He was thinking. With Andreina, he judged, he had to keep to facts, and avoid any discussion, because she was captious and overbearing in argument and certain to come off victorious. And he should be equally careful to keep clear of sentiment, because on that terrain again Andreina had the advantage of her beauty and that strange, sensuous frenzy of hers. Finally he spoke:

"I imagine Stefano had some proposals for you, did he not? I suppose he tried to begin over again at the point where you and he left off!"

She laughed again, with her head still lowered.

"Of course he did! What questions! What else would he have come here for?"

"Well, what answer did you give him?"

"Answer?" She spoke quite indifferently. "I gave him no answer. What answer did I give him ten years ago? No answer then!"

Pietro felt an intolerable uneasiness come over him. He could hardly maintain his calm.

"You will be so good as to send him away at once, and never see him again."

As he spoke, and more out of resentment than as an assertion of will, he tightened his hold on the girl's wrist and wrenched her arm somewhat. He saw her stagger forward, bending loosely to his pressure. She did not struggle or try to free her arm.

"Let go of me!" she said, still unsteady on her feet. "You bore me with your questions and your stupid violence. I shall do as I please. I am going to take Stefano for a lover."

Pietro felt the thrust to the depth of his soul.

"So," he could not help exclaiming, "as between me and Stefano, you prefer Stefano?"

"It's your fault," she replied, still unsteady, her face lowered. "Stefano is not as tiresome or as stupid as you are. He understands me. More than that—he is a sort of looking-glass in which

I see myself as I really am. You, with your hypocritical virtue, your small petty ideas, your silly ideals, you are unbearable. The only pleasure I get out of being with you is the fun of deceiving those two idiots, Sofia and Matteo."

Pietro's distress had thrown him into a sort of reverie. "I must not lose my head!" he kept saying to himself. But the silence of the reception-room, with its white light raining upon the centre table, its green plants standing in line on the walnut bench, its dark-red wallpaper, seemed to fill out the monstrous solitude of a nightmare.

"So that's the way it is!" he finally remarked.

"Yes," laughed Andreina, "that's the way it is. Now give me a kiss!" She threw her arms about his neck. "Then let's go back into the other room and continue making a fool of that ninny in there." She tightened her clasp about his neck, trying to bend his head so that she could reach his lips with hers. Pietro, however, did not yield. He did not bend his head. His lips did not seek hers.

They stood there that way, looking at each other in silence, Andreina clasping him tight and panting on his breast, with the same frenzied light in her eyes, Pietro frowning with a sorrowful severity and shrinking back somewhat.

"Kiss me!" she murmured softly. "If you will, I'll send Stefano away! I'll send him away at once!"

On that condition Pietro thought he might content her. Not without a certain tenderness mixed with a bitter anguished hope, he bent his head to meet her lips. But then he suddenly observed that Andreina had freed a hand behind his head and was reaching for the parlour door. He was just in time to throw her off and leap back. The door swung open violently, and there, at the end of the room, sat Stefano and Sofia.

Angry, panting, Pietro stood still a moment, looking at Andreina. It was all clear. She had thrown the door open that Sofia might see her arms about Pietro's neck. And now, standing erect on the other side of the door, she was showing by her quivering unsatisfied face the depth of the hatred that had inspired the treacherous manœuvre.

The gaze they exchanged was not long protracted. Andreina smoothed her rumpled garment with a stroke of her hand, looked at Pietro with the distressing, unseeing glance of triumph that a lunatic might have for a rescuer whom he has successfully eluded, and then, carelessly, with her usual slow and stately stride, re-entered the sitting-room.

During all that time Sofia had not uttered a word to Stefano. On catching sight of Andreina, she rose to her feet.

"I must be going," she said, hurriedly gathering up her gloves and her purse and putting them under her arm. "I have several things to do, and it is late. Good-bye! Good-bye, everybody!"

And frightened, almost furtive, apparently stunned, she left the room, followed by Andreina, absorbed, half dreaming, and holding her two hands to her head, as though she were thinking of something else.

The two men were left alone.

A cold, pugnacious wrath held full possession of Pietro. He could feel his heart pounding, and his breath coming hard. Slowly he closed the door, then crossed the room, and planted himself in front of the invalid, inside the circle of the empty chairs.

"I told you not to come here," he said, panting, his hands in his pockets. "Why did you come?"

The other gave a glance, half fearful, half contemptuous.

"Don't bore me!" he answered, sourly. "I came because it suited me to come. There you have it!"

"You will leave at once!"

"Just watch me!" said Stefano, and he hitched back upon the divan, adjusting himself to the cushions as though trying to indicate by his attitude, as well as by his words, a firm resolve not to do as Pietro directed.

Pietro stepped forward, prey to a cruel, bloodthirsty rage.

"I really believe you are going!" he remarked quietly. Then suddenly drawing his hands from his pockets he seized the cripple by the right foot and gave a hard pull. "I'll drag him along the floor and throw him out into the garden," he thought, beside himself in his fury.

The attack caught Stefano by surprise. The first pull laid him on his back with his body half over the edge of the couch and outside the alcove. His arms and hands grasped frantically at the couch cover.

"Let go of me!" he cried. "Help!"

But then, with an agility one would not have expected in him, he turned half over and dug the fingers of both hands into the mattress on the divan.

With another pull Pietro had the wildly writhing body on the floor clear of the alcove, but the couch and the cushions had come with it.

The door swung open and Andreina re-entered the room, to see Pietro pulling at Stefano's legs, the cushions on the floor, and the couch dislodged from its proper place.

"What's the matter here?" she cried, angry, harsh.

She rushed between the two contenders and threw Pietro back with a violent push. He drew to one side, breathing hard. Then Andreina, with rough, angry movements that clearly betrayed her repugnance and her antipathy, helped Stefano to his feet, pushed the couch back into the alcove with a shove from her thighs, seated the cripple on it again, and rearranged the cushions.

"You two," she added, "can kill each other any time you want to, but you are not going to do it here!"

Her voice, as she spoke, was sad, exasperated, absent-minded. And, in fact, she sank upon the couch herself, at the invalid's side, hid her face in her hands, and seemed to drop away into a melancholy abstraction.

There was silence for a time. Standing in the same spot, still panting, his face red, Pietro smoothed his hair and straightened his cravat, which had come loose and was hanging down the outside of his coat.

"Don't think I have given up the idea of getting you out of here," he warned the cripple, fiercely. "I'll give you five minutes to leave of your own accord. After that I'll begin again. Next time I shall take you head first."

He reached for a cigarette, lighted it, then went and sat down in an armchair at some distance from the divan.

There was another silence. By that time Stefano had recovered from his fright and was ready to speak again.

"You can talk in that tone of voice when you are Andreina's husband," he said, malignantly. "For the time being you are not her husband. The wedding has not taken place. You are not even engaged." At each of these sentences he looked at the woman, still bent forward, still absorbed, in order to measure the effect they were having on her. "In view of all that, I shall not go until Andreina asks me to."

He had not guessed wrongly. The words "husband," "wedding," "engaged," brought Andreina with a start from her meditation. Without straightening up or removing her hands from her face, she looked through spread fingers at the cripple.

"Pietro my husband?" she exclaimed, in her low hushed voice. "Who told you that silly nonsense?"

"He did!" said Stefano, satisfied, hitching back among the cushions and pointing at Pietro with his cane.

Between the same spread fingers Andreina's glittering eyes moved from Stefano to the other man.

"You my husband?" she asked, quietly. "Whose queer idea is that?"

Pietro would have been glad enough not to answer. How distressing, he thought, that Andreina should have learned from the foul lips of that cripple the so intimate and so delicate decision that he had reached, a decision so closely bound up with his love and his fondest hopes! And still more distressing was it to discuss it just there, in the presence of that same cripple, who would not fail to cast ridicule upon it, and with Andreina entirely upset and beside herself! For a moment that was full of bitter suffering and ill-repressed passion, he held his peace, gazing out from the semidarkness in which he was sitting at the two persons whom the red lamp in the alcove seemed in a sense to unite in one halo of light. "Let's not talk of all that now," he would have implored. "Let's wait till we are alone, when the most rash and beautiful things can be said naturally and without fear, and no Stefano is present to chill our hearts and divide us."

But he had to answer—there was no avoiding it.

"It's true," he said at last slowly, trying to use the plainest, least colourful words. "I have decided to break with Sofia and marry you. Really I should have preferred not to broach the matter just now, and I should have liked especially to be the first to speak of it to you. But it makes no difference, I suppose. Stefano has seen fit to tell you first. I have no real reason to complain."

A deep silence ensued. Between the fingers that she still held spread over her face, Andreina's eyes seemed to grow immeasurably large from surprise and from an ironical, frenzied fixation.

"But I have a reason to complain," she cried suddenly, straightening up, digging her fists into the couch behind her and resting her weight on them. "I your wife? But you are crazy, my dear! You have gone stark mad!"

Stefano smiled, let his head fall back against the wall behind the couch, and looked up at the ceiling. Motionless, his face darkening, Pietro hesitated a moment. Then he proposed:

"Let's not talk of this matter now—what do you say, Andreina? You are not yourself, Stefano's visit has very properly upset you!"

"Upset me?" Andreina seemed to reach the heights of angry excitement. "I, upset by Stefano's visit? Do you know what you are, my dear? You are a hypocrite. But to show you how badly you are mistaken, to help you to know me better and cure any crazy notions you may have about my becoming your wife, just see what I am going to do!" She rose, climbed back on the couch to Stefano's side, and with a rapid movement slipped an arm around his neck. "You may know from this"—she seemed calmer now—"that not only was I not upset, as you say, by Stefano's visit, but that I was glad to see him, and for the reason that he is the only one who really understands me. And that is so true that I am ready to become his mistress again." She turned towards the man at her side with an alluring coquetry that cut into Pietro like a knife. "Tell me, Stefano—you would take me back, wouldn't you!"

The cripple's eyes shone bright. Without answering, with a turgid, fascinated deliberateness, he slipped an arm around Andreina's waist, drew her as close as he could to him, then took one of her hands and kissed it, lowering his eyes, and manifesting through the quivering of his nostrils and the earnestness of his face a sensuousness that was fraught with assurance and hope. These movements, but, even more so, the sight of Andreina clasped by that ugly arm and drawn after a fashion against the cripple's side, gave Pietro a nervous, unbearable suffering. "Don't! Don't!" he started to cry, but as in any other nightmare, when he tried to raise his voice it failed him, and he sat there, motionless, silent, looking at the pair out of staring eyes, biting his lips and digging his nails into the arms of his chair.

Meanwhile, without releasing the woman from his clasp, Stefano had taken Andreina's chin in his fingers, as one might take the muzzle of a dog, and sat gazing into her eyes, tenderly but also imperiously. Seated lower on the couch than he was, Andreina had to look upwards to meet his gaze. Her eyes took on a trembling, frightened, submissive expression. Pietro noticed, however, that she had opened her hands and was bracing them against her sides as though in readiness to repel an assault, or to endure a great physical pain, and that from her inner disturbance her gorgeous, youthful chest rose and fell in a breathing that was far too rapid.

All that was a matter of seconds. Pietro was time and again tempted to rise and throw himself between the two, yet he did not so much as lighten the pressure of his spine on his chairback.

Convinced, apparently, that he had hypnotized the woman, Stefano made ready, as it seemed, to kiss her. That was the end. Roughly, Andreina shook him off and leapt to her feet. She stood there for a moment, deathly pale, breathing hard, and seemed to hesitate, looking now at the astonished Stefano, now at the glowering, motionless Pietro.

"Do not follow me, either of you!" she commanded, finally. "I have something to do in the kitchen."

Then with a toss of her head and a resolute, violent shrug of her shoulders, she swept from the room.

Alone again, the two men looked at each other.

"That ought to please you," Stefano remarked, almost at once, crestfallen. "You need not be afraid of me. As you see, she loves you and not me."

Pietro made no reply.

"Well, now?" he asked, quietly, "are you going or not?"

He was expecting further resistance on Stefano's part. Instead, the cripple nodded.

"Yes, I am going," he said. "But there has to be one condition."

"State it!"

"Well, you see, you had the brilliant idea of running away with my crutches, and I need someone to help me home. Now Andreina has a maid in there. She's just the person I need. Perhaps you'll be good enough to go and call her."

Pietro rose without a word, stepped out into the vestibule, and rang the bell. The kitchen door opened and Cecilia appeared at the end of the long dark corridor.

"The countess," he commanded, "wants you to get into your things and see Signor Davico home!"

He saw her begin working at once at the buttons on her apron. She was only too happy to find an excuse for going out.

Pietro went back into the sitting-room.

"Now," asked Stefano, the moment he reappeared, "might I know where my crutches are?"

"They are at my hotel," Pietro answered. "You can send and get them any time you wish."

The cripple had recovered his good humour. He smiled.

"Really, you ought to be the one to get them back to me. But don't bother, at least for the present! It will suit me very well to use this maid of Andreina's two or three times. A very cute baby!"

"Keep your plans to yourself!" answered Pietro, glowering, hostile.

A long silence followed. Sunk deep in his chair, his wrinkled forehead bent forward, his chin resting on one hand, Pietro seemed to be thinking. Actually his mind was filled with one single desire—that the cripple should be gone. In front of him Stefano had managed to rise to his feet, resting most of his weight on his cane. He stood looking into a mirror that hung from the facing of the alcove. He was not satisfied, apparently, with his complexion. He kept twisting his mouth, clenching and unclenching his teeth, examining his tongue.

Cecilia found them in those respective postures when she entered. She had put on a green raincoat that had pinkish glints. Between the hood on her head and the upturned collar, her round, flabby, unevenly rouged face looked like an over-ripe peach that had spoiled in places. A belt was drawn in about her waist. Under the waterproof fabric her full flaccid breast protruded as though the garment had been stuffed with a roll of newspapers.

She hesitated, looking first at Stefano, then at Pietro.

"Are you the gentleman I am to see home?" she asked at last of the former.

"I'm the one," said Stefano, turning around, his face beaming. "But do you think you will be strong enough to help me along? I'm pretty heavy! Better think it over!"

"Oh, no," said the girl, bashful, full of goodwill. "You won't be too heavy! I can manage!"

Stefano whirled deftly on his good foot, and slipped an arm across the girl's shoulders.

"I don't mind telling you," he said, smiling, "that I am not at all displeased to be seen on the street with a pretty girl like you. For one thing"—and he laughed—"people will look at you and not at me. They won't notice that I'm a cripple. What's your name?"

"Cecilia," answered the maid, waiting docilely with lowered head for the invalid to get solidly balanced.

"Cecilia! That's a pretty name!" said Stefano, venturing his first step. "Well, Cecilia, I guess we're ready! Good-bye, Monatti—and drop around once in a while!"

Pietro did not rise or otherwise stir in his armchair. He saw the maid in the green-pinkish raincoat and the cripple in the light sporting suit make their way slowly to the door. The girl was solicitude itself, pushing the chairs out of the way and matching her own steps with those of the invalid. The latter, for his part, continued laughing and jesting good-humouredly. They reached the reception-room. There, Cecilia, punctilious, thorough in all her duties, carefully closed the door.

Pietro was left alone.

XII

The room was full of cigarette smoke that hung thick and bluish in the lighted alcove over the divan, around the blood-orange shade of the lamp, over the empty chairs that stood about in a half-circle. Two cigarette ends, one Stefano's, the other stained with red belonging to Andreina, were burning out side by side on the edge of the ashtray, each sending up a thin thread of smoke into the thickening atmosphere. Another wisp was curling from the cigarette that Pietro, sunk deep in his chair, was holding between two fingers of his clasped hands. That impure fog, the spectacle of the couch that still bore visible imprints of the two forms that had sat upon it, the echo, still shimmering between those four cramped walls, of the bitter talk that had taken place in this room, still vivid memories of the despairing acts of violence that he had witnessed or taken part in that day, all contributed to sustain in Pietro a stunned and gloomily astonished absorption.

He sat as he was, not exactly thinking, but rather drifting about in reverie among the events of the day, halting with a sluggish half-lugubrious sort of pleasure, now on one, now on another among them, his weary mind, as it were, falling to pieces like a badly tied bundle of faggots, to allow its memories to scatter haphazard about. He saw himself on the river drive slapping Andreina's face and receiving her "You are contemptible!" in return; then in his room at the hotel with his fiancée, then at the professor's with his hands clutching at Stefano's throat. This dulled, passively reminiscent state of mind was more like the prostration of half-wakefulness than a rational examination of actual happenings. It lasted for a long time, long enough for the silence and his complete physical repose to clear his brain a little and alleviate his painful inner tension. Finally he decided that he had to have a breath of air. He rose, went to the window, opened it, and threw back the blinds on the outside.

The window faced the garden on the same side of the building as the main entrance. Pietro bent over and looked out. It was now dark night. The air was cold and foggy, but there was no wind. In the yellow glow of the two lamps that stood to either side of the portal, he could see the narrow cement walk that followed the wall of the house, and the gravelled path, its whiteness softened by the damp. Beyond that, everything—the flower-bed, the tree, the ivy-covered circuit wall—blended into a single dark mass of uncertain outlines. Not less dark and indistinct were the green-draped arch that separated the garden from the street, and the little iron gate, itself covered with ivy, that was hardly distinguishable from the rest of the grating.

But beyond that thick and shadowy barrier the air above the street, illumined by lights that Pietro could not see, belonged apparently to another world, a world that was more clearly outlined, brighter, freer. It may have been that the cold, clean night air, coming suddenly to replace the close atmosphere of the room, finally dispelled the last remnants of the stupor that had temporarily clouded his mind; or it may have been a feeling that he had at last succeeded in freeing Andreina of Stefano and was now, therefore, in a position to start his life and hers over again along new and more promising roads. At any rate, as he leaned out of the window and looked down into the garden, he began to think of the many things that might be expected to result from the decisions he had made, from his future marriage to Andreina and his life with her thereafter.

In spite of his goodwill he could not help feeling a sort of regret at the prospect, as regarded old hopes and ambitions. He did not think that he was making a mistake, yet he did feel obligated somehow to persuade himself that in marrying Andreina he was doing not only a noble thing, but a wise and sensible thing. "It's true!" he reflected, "Andreina is poor and Sofia is rich. But Andreina is a hundred times more beautiful than Sofia. Andreina has none of the social background of Sofia. On the other hand she is much more intelligent. She will only have to apply her talents to worthier ends to be able to invert that advantage within a year or two. It is by no means proved that a wife who is rich and aristocratic but ugly and stupid is of greater help to a man than a woman who is poor and discredited but beautiful and intelligent." More deserving of serious concern, he judged, were the economic prospects. He had never earned more than two thousand lire a month, and Andreina, with only herself to look out for, was always complaining of the inadequacy of the four thousand that Matteo allowed her. What could one set against that drawback? Why, of course! His own impassioned hope, and the love that united them!

So he rambled in his thoughts, in spite of the cold damp air that was gradually chilling him, as he stood there at the window, looking out into his future, mathematical calculations alternating with sweeter, more alluring imagery. But suddenly noises from beyond the garden gate attracted his attention, and he turned his eyes towards the street. First he heard a creaking of brakes as an automobile came to a stop, then a car door noisily closing. Finally the gate opened without a sound and someone entered the garden.

Pietro could not make out who it was at first. But after tossing a lighted cigarette aside so zestfully that the dark background of the flowerbed was sprinkled with sparks, the visitor suddenly raised his head and looked at the window. It was then that Pietro recognized Matteo.

"One more nuisance!" he thought, and he was certain that he made an instinctive movement away from the window. Actually he had not stirred, and Matteo had plenty of time to identify him.

"Well, well!" exclaimed the marchese. "At an open window in this weather!"

"I have no time to explain to Matteo!" Pietro thought rapidly. "In any event he would insist on talking with Andreina present, and if he sees her in the state she is in, far from marrying her I shall have a fine chance of losing both her and Sofia." His conclusion from the lightning-like calculation was that his safer course would be to do everything possible to keep Matteo out of the house.

"I was here watching for you," he lied, hurriedly.

"For me?"

"Andreina is out with the maid. She asked me to wait for you here and explain that she could not see you this evening. I have been waiting a good half-hour," he added, in a tone almost of complaint.

Matteo was evidently puzzled. Pietro saw him lower his head and take a few steps back and forth on the gravelled path. Viewed from above in that manner—in his grey, faultlessly new hat, a nattily fitted overcoat, broad at the shoulders, drawn in at the waist, carefully pressed trousers, a white scarf neatly tied and adjusted, a malacca cane, yellow gloves—he looked for all the world like a walking fashion manikin.

"So she's out!" he finally repeated. "Strange! I thought I saw a light in her room. . . . Well, so that's that. And you—what are you doing? Are you going to freeze there in that window?"

"Of course not!" answered Pietro quickly. "I'll go along with you."

And without giving Matteo a chance to reply, he closed the window noisily, ran to the vestibule, seized his coat and hat, and in a second was himself down in the garden.

Matteo was nervously clipping at the tips of the shrubs in the flowerbed with the end of his cane.

"So she went out?" he again asked. "Any idea where she went?"

"Not the least!"

They reached the sidewalk beyond the gate.

"You see?" noted Matteo, pointing. "Her window is lighted."

Pietro made no reply. They entered the automobile and drove off.

"What do you think you'll do?" asked Pietro, after a time.

With his gloved hands clutching the wheel, his body bent forward, his eyes nervously glued to the road, Matteo handled his small, black, stylish little car with an excessive prudence that almost blatantly advertised his good manners and his status as an amateur driver.

"What am I going to do?" There was a cross-street just ahead. He slowed down to a very easy pace. "What would you like to do? My plans are all upset. I might go to the club. But I played cards all day long yesterday—I believe I have had enough. I am half inclined to go and see that new film on the Corso. They say there's a woman in it very much like Andreina."

Matteo's good humour was beginning to jar on Pietro.

"I don't know that she's so much like Andreina. I do know it's a fine film. Go and see it!"

"Yes, but it has an unhappy ending." Matteo's horn was not working properly. He kept pressing the button, producing a series of hoarse, broken, rattling honks. "I don't like unhappy endings. When I go to the movies I want to have a good time. One can get all the gloom one needs from life itself."

Pietro was at the limit of his patience.

"Well, there's a good comic too—near by here." And he mentioned the name of a film. "Why don't you go to that?"

But Matteo shook his head.

"No, I've seen it—not bad, in spots. . . . I imagine I'll end up by going back to Andreina's and waiting till she comes in. There are people who don't like waiting. Now I don't mind it at all. I pick up a book and kill time browsing."

"And you do cross-word puzzles!" supplied Pietro, sarcastic, about ready to murder the man.

"Yes, I do cross-word puzzles too," assented Matteo, in the best of faith.

They had almost reached the theatre where the tragic film was being shown. Purchasers of the cheaper tickets were waiting in long lines under the low-hung marquee; but not a few fashionable cars were discharging holders of more expensive seats at the same entrance. Pietro's head was in a whirl of mad devices. "I believe I'll get out and cut one of his tires with my pocket-knife! . . . Or perhaps I'll remember some place, far away, where Andreina said she was going, and send him off there on a wild-goose chase."

He was disturbed in the fabrication of such fantastic schemes by Matteo's slow, melodious voice:

"Where shall I let you out? As for me, all considered, I believe I'll go back to Andreina's."

Helpless in his impotent rage, Pietro sat silent and looked at his companion. To avoid the traffic Matteo had turned his car into a long side street, so narrow that there was no room to turn around, and there was no outlet from it for a considerable distance ahead. In a flash Pietro computed that if he were to get out there at the corner of the avenue he could reach Andreina's well in advance of Matteo, who would waste several minutes in manœuvring out of that cul-de-sac.

"Let me down here!" he said, abruptly.

Before the car had come to a full stop, he reached the sidewalk, and without closing the door behind him, rushed back towards the avenue past the shops and stores that lined the narrow street. Colliding with astonished pedestrians, taking incredible risks among the cars that all but filled that thoroughfare, he was back at the theatre in a trice. There he hailed a taxicab and within three minutes was at Andreina's door again.

On opening he remembered that Matteo also had a key. He decided to fasten the door with a chain. "A lot of good it will do him to knock and pound now!" he reflected, satisfied. His eye fell on the telephone. "He will be at that too!" As a precaution against any interruption from that source, he unhooked the receiver.

These concrete measures seemed to put him in possession of his wits again. He stepped to the mirror and smoothed his hair. Yes, he would go in and see Andreina, tell her that he had told everything to Matteo, and so, confronting her with the accomplished fact, anticipate any temptation she might feel to rebel. But the dry sonorous ticking of the clock in the reception-room suddenly reminded him of the deep silence that prevailed in the apartment. "Could Andreina actually have gone out?" he wondered, alarmed. He tore aside the curtain that cut off the corridor. No, there at the end, was a narrow strip of light! His heart leapt in relief. He groped his way along the unlighted hallway, came to Andreina's door, and opened it.

She was stretched out full length on the bed, her legs crossed, one arm hanging limp along her body, the other bent across her forehead as though to shade her eyes from the glare of the lamp. She made no move at the sound of the opening door, except that her thick painted lips, the only part of her face that was visible, curled into a sort of pout, as though to say: "Do not disturb me —leave me alone!"

Uncertain, hesitant, Pietro swung the door to, then advanced to the bedside, and stood looking at her. After his two excited rides across the city, the motionless woman and the silent room seemed to create a dense, opaque atmosphere about him. It was as though, after a rapid sail on an open sea under clear skies, he were entering a bank of thick fog. "That rogue of a Stefano is on her mind," he thought. "Nothing could be clearer!" The girl's whole expressiveness, in that posture, lay in her mouth, which seemed to have grown parched and dried from her meditative suffering. Now and again the thick lips, painted with a dry rouge, would open slightly and the tip of her tongue would come out and wet them; or the lower lip would draw in convulsively, while a row of white teeth would descend upon it in a slow, painful, sustained pressure. "All due to that rascal's coming here!" Pietro reflected bitterly. However, his study of the woman's prostrate form lasted only a few seconds. He walked around the bed, sat down on the side, and lifted the hand that lay inert on the cover.

Forcing a smile, and trying to find an affectionate, persuasive tone, he murmured:

"Stop thinking about him!"

Slowly, as though she were hearing him speak in such a tone of voice for the first time, Andreina removed the arm from over her eyes, turned her head a little, and looked at him.

"Stop thinking of whom?" she asked.

"Stefano!" Pietro replied, pressing her hand gently and sketching a smile of understanding affection.

The corners of Andreina's mouth quivered. She gazed at her lover with a bewildered intentness as though struggling in vain to divert her mind from a besetting thought.

"Who's thinking of Stefano?" she finally asked, in a thread of a voice, calm but sad.

"You, for one!" Pietro insisted, smiling.

The girl shook her head.

"No, I was not thinking of Stefano," she answered, in a stronger tone. "I was thinking of myself."

"What were you thinking?"

She gave him a strange look that seemed to appraise his personal resources and possibilities.

"I'd rather not say," she finally replied. Then she covered her eyes with her arm again.

Pietro bit his lips. Once again, as always, he found himself checkmated by the stubborn, contemptuous attitude of independence that the woman maintained regarding him, withholding any sort of intimate confidence on those matters that were really essential.

"As things stand between us now," he insisted, "don't you think you know me well enough to tell me anything that is going on in your mind?"

"Oh, I'm sure I do!" she replied. And then, after a moment, she resumed slowly: "Want to have a specimen of my thoughts? Here's one! You would be terribly surprised if I were to go back to Stefano, wouldn't you! And yet I am quite capable of doing that! You see, you don't know me at all! You think I am somebody that I am not—there you have the truth!"

A silence followed. Pietro sat with lowered head, pondering the woman's remark. He could not help feeling a certain amount of angry, apprehensive jealousy, yet he was more than ever convinced that Andreina was exaggerating in her judgments of herself and that the blame for that, as for everything else that was going on, lay with Stefano. He could see, nevertheless, that Andreina would never be brought to admitting that truth, and he therefore concluded that it would be better not to start the argument over again on that issue. Matteo might arrive from one moment to the next. He felt a burning impulse to tell her of the decisions he had reached, so forestalling anything that Matteo might say or do. He looked up.

"Andreina," he began, "something happened while you were lying here. You ought to know about it. It concerns you very directly."

The girl had not stirred after covering her eyes again. She seemed to have fallen half asleep. But at those words she removed her arms, again turned her head a little, and repeated:

"Something happened? What happened?"

"Matteo came!" Pietro resumed. He knew that he was taking an important, a decisive step. His heart began to beat violently and his breath came short. "Well, as Stefano told you, I have decided to break my engagement with Sofia—since I would be marrying her only for money and other selfish considerations—and marry you, since it is you that I love. I told Matteo the whole truth, therefore—that you have been unfaithful to him all along, and having an affair with me."

He paused, giving a hard pressure to the hand that lay on the bed-cover, and looking into Andreina's eyes.

She did not move, but her eyes gradually dilated under a growing comprehension and stupor.

"You told him of our affair?" she asked, incredulous. "You told him that?"

"Yes, I told him that."

With savage violence Andreina withdrew her hand and sat up on the bed.

"You told him that?" she repeated, raising her voice to a note of shrill dismay. "You did that? Who said you could do that? How did you dare? What right did you have to say such a thing?"

In an instinctive reaction to the abject discomfiture that her cries betrayed, Pietro turned hard, cold, resolved.

"I did it," he returned, "because I wanted to force you to consider your real interests for once."

She raised her two arms above her head.

"You scoundrel! You scoundrel! How did you dare? . . . Don't you see? Matteo will never marry me now!"

Pietro was conscious almost of hating her. Cold, violent, he answered:

"That's exactly the point that I wanted to settle! For that matter, you said you had ceased to care. And really now, you yourself have admitted that you never had the remotest chance of marrying him!"

"One says all sorts of things," cried Andreina, gesturing mechanically, desperately, like a drowning person grasping at a floating shingle. "But what business was it of yours? . . . How could you say such a thing? . . . Why did you?"

She was now frankly shouting, in a frenzy that was close kin to madness.

Partly from the frigid anger that her attitude inspired in him, partly with the conscious design of preventing her from shouting him down, Pietro seized her by her two wrists.

"Let me alone!" she cried, struggling to free herself. "Don't you see! Not only can I not marry him now! He won't even keep me any longer! Don't you see that if he leaves me, I end in the gutter? Yes, because being with you, as husband, lover, or anything else, would be as bad as being in the gutter, or even worse! You didn't think of that, did you!"

Pietro was trying to hold her motionless in her fierce resistance when, through the open door of the bedroom, came the sound of knocking at the other end of the corridor. Andreina ceased her efforts. Falling back on the bed and lying quite still, indifferent to Pietro who was resting, red-faced and panting, with almost all the weight of his body upon her and holding her firmly by the wrists, she listened, lifting her head a little from the pillow.

There was a moment of complete silence, then the knocking began again. But this time it was less regular, more furious, and with a variety of sounds. Some knocks, heavy and muffled, seemed to be delivered by a fist. Others, light but ringing, seemed to come from a cane.

Andreina turned her head towards Pietro again.

"There's someone at the door!" she said, strangely calm, her voice hushed. "Who is it?"

Pietro smiled, he could not have said whether from the pleasure at the success of his idea of the chain, or in order to keep up his own courage.

"It's Matteo," he answered. "He is coming for an explanation. I put the chain on the door. He will not get in."

Her eyes staring, Andreina looked first at him and then at the door. Finally with all the desperate violence of which her strong youthful body was capable she began to struggle again.

"Let me go, you scoundrel! . . . Matteo! Matt——"

She could not finish the word. Pietro had managed to get his arm over her mouth without, however, releasing his hold on her wrists.

For a time the wrestling continued in silence, Andreina trying to free her hands and uttering suffocated cries of fury; Pietro trying to overpower her with the sheer weight of his body and at the same time stifle her screams. Meanwhile the alternating blows of fist and cane on the door continued to echo through the silent apartment, but finally they ceased. Either judging that Matteo had gone away and could not come to her rescue, or else because her strength had failed, Andreina suddenly relaxed. Her muscles lost their tension, her head fell upon the pillow, and she lay quite still, on her back, her face pale, her eyes closed. When Pietro was certain that Matteo had given up, he let go of Andreina's wrists, arose, and sat down on the edge of the bed. Andreina took advantage of the freedom allowed her to turn over, bury her face in the pillow again, and gather her arms about her head.

A long silence followed.

There was no tremor or shaking in Andreina's shoulders. It was evident that she could not even find tears to console her in the disaster that had suddenly come upon her. More probably, thought Pietro, as he sat there, panting from his exertions and studying her intently, she was prey to an arid, distorted, hopeless despondency. That diagnosis at first filled him with a hot resentment. What sort of a person was she to give in to that extent to a disappointment so sordid? But then he reflected that he had many times found himself tarred with the same blemishes of vulgar hopes and ambitions that he ascribed to Andreina, and considering furthermore that Stefano's reappearance and her consequent discomfiture had much to do with her disgusting state of mind, he managed to stifle his anger and recover the sympathy and the free, unprejudiced judgment that he credited to himself as basic traits of his better moments. He concluded, at any rate, that the time had come to abandon violent methods and turn to more reasonable, more amiable forms of persuasion.

"Come now, Andreina!" he began, in a tone almost of entreaty. "Don't feel that way! Just think a moment, and you'll see that you have no reason at all to feel that way. How ought I to feel, on my side?" he added, with half a smile. "I was going to marry a girl with a title and lots of money. Now I have lost her by doing what I did. You lose Matteo—that's true. But Sofia meant much more to me, and she was a sure thing—in fact, the opportunity of a lifetime."

He had thought of all that as a sort of consoling approach. Gradually he would work over to the main point—his proposal of marriage.

But his words failed by far to have the effect he had expected of them. He saw Andreina remove one arm from her head and look at him steadily out of the one eye she had free.

"Yes, you're right!" she said, slowly, thoughtfully, like a person trying to analyse a situation. "You have lost Sofia. If you were to appear at the Tanzillo place now, they would send the butler to throw you out."

From Pietro's standpoint, the remark conveyed a world of incomprehension and seemed to suggest not a little satisfaction. He was neither pleased nor flattered.

"But I'm the one who is breaking the engagement," he tried to interpose, "not Sofia. And I am breaking it in order to marry you. I am leaving Sofia against my interests and against her will."

"So," resumed Andreina, ignoring his plea, "all your campaign to marry money and a title has ended in a fizzle. You have been betrayed by your wretched sentimentalism. You get neither money nor social position. You are again the nobody you were to begin with." She paused a moment, as though savouring the conclusions that she had reached. "Now go and tell me we are not alike!" she added after another moment's thought. "We started out for the same destination, though over different roads, I using shrewdness and deceit, you using simplicity and sentiment, I deceiving others, you deceiving yourself. I have probably overdone on the side of bad faith. You certainly have overdone on the side of good faith. . . . It's a curious coincidence that we have both lost everything on the same move!"

The subtlety and obstinacy of the girl's thinking awakened all of Pietro's usual ire.

"Now, Andreina," he protested, "do try to be a little fair. You know better than I do that I proposed to Sofia because I thought I was in love with her. The moment I discovered that I loved you, I decided to give her up."

As before, Andreina seemed to pay no attention.

"We hoped to succeed by the same tricks." Under her outward calm and clarity of mind, an intense exhilaration seemed to be mounting in her. "We both came within a hair's breadth of winning! Imagine what life would have been like for us, with you married to Sofia and me to Matteo! Probably," she added, musing, "we failed because we were not quite hard enough. There was too much warmth in the intrigues we started. You talked altruism and virtue so loud that you finally took yourself in. Yet it was just vanity all along, just wretched vanity! So—we've lost, and there's nothing else to do but go on from here in the open!"

A galling uneasiness came over Pietro.

"Yes, in the open!" he repeated, but he was not sure that he understood the expression as she did, for he could see a strange wild light in her eyes.

Suddenly she sat upright on the bed.

"Let's not talk of all this any more," she said, hurriedly. "There's nothing to it! You were right in telling Matteo everything, a thousand times right. It was stupid of me to think of it as such a disaster. Come here, now!" She reached over, put her arms about his neck and drew him towards her. "This way, now! . . . Tell me—you love me?"

More than anything that she said, it was the frenzied coldness about the way she acted and spoke that worried Pietro.

"Yes, I love you," he replied. "You know how much I love you."

"And you want me to marry you—yes?"

"Yes, I want you to marry me."

He drew back his head and tried to get a look at her eyes.

"Well, I'm willing!" she said. "You can marry me. Marriage is a very close tie. We shall be very close to each other afterwards. I am ready to become your wife. However, there's a condition!"

"What condition?"

"I'll explain it all to you," she said, without taking her arms from around his neck, in fact pressing him more tightly to her. "I'll tell you now. But you must promise not to be surprised, not to get angry, and not to interrupt me till I have finished. First, I am going to tell you just what I am—if you are to marry me, you ought to know the girl you are making your wife. . . . But, dear me, let's be comfortable! Here, lie down—here, beside me!" Grave, excited, eager, she forced his shoulders down to the bed, then made him stretch out his legs, and put his head on the pillow beside hers. "Now listen to me. You yourself have said that when I lose Matteo and you Sofia, and we marry, we will both be in about the same situation—in other words we shall both be in the gutter. But that doesn't make any difference—I am willing to marry you just the same. . . . Only . . . we've got to lay all pretending aside and work in the open, as I said. Well then, listen: The money we need—where is it? . . . Maria Luisa has it. Get it away from her! If Maria Luisa dies, Stefano becomes sole heir. Stefano, you hear? That means me! So listen then: Go and kill Maria Luisa!"

Pietro looked at her. She was breathing heavily through half-opened lips. Her thin delicate nostrils quivered animatedly, cruelly, at every breath she drew. In truth, the proposal was so extraordinary, so unthinkable, that for a moment Pietro was more concerned to adjust it to his mind, after a fashion, than to debate it seriously with the woman. He sought a way to indicate to her, in deference to his promise, that he had not been dazed by the monstrousness of her suggestion.

"You must enjoy hearing yourself talk like that," he finally ventured. "You like words for their sound! 'Go and kill Maria Luisa!' You said that with a certain physical gusto!"

Andreina was looking into space in front of her, perhaps pondering his query, perhaps disconcerted by it.

"I believe you're right," she finally answered. "I believe I do like the words, just for their sound. So deliciously cold! So merciless! However," she added, looking him deep in the eye, "I'd like the thing they stand for much better."

There was a moment's silence. Pietro lay gazing at the girl, his being flooded with a sincere, despairing horror. At the same time he was conscious, deeper down in his spirit, of a certain vain self-satisfaction at the intensity of his revulsion.

"What are we doing, Andreina?" he finally stammered. "Have you gone mad? And here I am soberly discussing certain words and the way you pronounce them! I believe I'm going mad myself."

She answered his gaze coldly. An uncontrollable agitation had mastered Pietro. He was trembling all over. His eyes were opened wide.

"I don't see where the madness comes in!" she persisted.

"But all this is terrible, Andreina—terrible!"

The stirring of vanity at his horror was the only gleam of light that he could detect in the murky blackness into which he felt he had been manœuvred.

His nervousness seemed to touch a chord of maternal affection in Andreina.

"You are in a fever," she observed, calmly, solicitously, passing a hand over his forehead and finally introducing it with a protective dexterity between two buttons of his shirt so that it touched his skin. "Are you sure you are well? Why, your skin is hot—and your heart is beating so hard, so hard! See how quiet mine is!" And she took his head in her hands and pressed it to her side over her heart. "See, now! Try to be calmer. Lie out straighter, and get closer to me. I'll keep my hand over your heart till it stops beating so hard! Now listen to me! If what I have suggested were so horrible, why shouldn't I be shocked too? I should, shouldn't I?"

Pietro raised his eyes and looked at her, but made no answer.

"The fact is," she continued, "I have never been calmer or surer of myself in my whole life. Perhaps you think that when I tell you to go and kill Maria Luisa I am expressing a hate, or a feeling of desperation, granted that I am not simply mad. Well—nothing of the kind! I do despise Maria Luisa, that's true. But if it were just hatred I should not consider myself justified in speaking as I do. No, I say kill Maria Luisa, the way I would say kill a mad dog or any other dangerous or worthless animal. I said the same thing to my father here, this afternoon. If it were anybody other than Maria Luisa, I should probably be sorry afterwards. But since she is what she is, I think one would be doing a meritorious act in putting her out of the way. However, I won't go into that—you would never understand me. I'll merely say that I have figured it all out and taken account of everything." Her eyes lighted. "Yes, because the idea has been in my mind for some time, though I have never mentioned it to you. You could do as I say, in full assurance that everything would turn out all right on the practical side as well as on the moral. It would be something like putting in place an article that has been causing trouble by being out of place. With Maria Luisa dead and buried and the first shock over, you would feel much better, inside as well as out. And there we would be, belonging to each other, very close to each other—and I loving you as I have never loved before." She paused for a long moment, and then asked, grave, calm: "Well, will you do as I say?"

She did not once remove her eyes from Pietro's, and as she looked at him in that fixed, unavoidable way, she kept running her frigid, nervous fingers over the skin on his chest. At that touch, under that gaze, an extraordinary commotion took possession of the young man's spirit. Horrified, he was even more conscious still of a fascinated wonder, a frightened, uncontrollable curiosity to know more, to get to the bottom of it all.

"What do you expect me to promise?" he could not help asking, finally.

He felt the body at his side stir. As the girl lay there, outstretched, holding him in a tight clasp, she brought her pale face, with its wild, fixed eyes, close to his and, almost without breathing, barely moving her lips, she murmured:

"I want you to kill Maria Luisa!"

The hypnotizing face was too close to Pietro's. He tried to draw back from it.

"Notice," he warned, nervously, "I am not taking this seriously. If I talk all this over with you, it's just to find out how on earth you ever came to be thinking such things. Tell me: Granted that, for all the reasons you mention, you have a right to do what you propose, do you think it could be done without anybody's finding out?"

Andreina's eyes, too close to his, moved rapidly from left to right and then back again, as though trying to take Pietro in from every point of view in order to determine just what he was good for.

"Answer me first!" she returned. "Then I'll tell you how it can be done without danger of discovery."

"But," pressed Pietro, "aren't you afraid of being arrested and sent to prison for a good long time?"

She looked him in the eye again and shook her head.

"In the first place, I won't be found out, and so I won't be arrested. But suppose I am? Suppose I go to jail? After I get out my life will be the same, with everything as it was before."

She gazed at him with an anxious gravity. The merest trace of breathing passed her half-opened lips. She was entirely still, except for the cold restless hand that kept in motion under the shirt on his chest.

"Words have no meaning!" reflected Pietro, and in the inadequacy of conventional language he thought he saw the most convincing proof of Andreina's earnestness.

"Don't you realize that that would be committing murder?" he asked again.

Again she shook her head.

"Those are just words," she replied. "You begin by imagining that they involve who knows what terrible consequences. Put them into practice and you perceive that they were really nothing but words. However, if you prefer, suppose we agree that I am asking for a murder."

By that time Pietro's curiosity was failing under pressure of his horror and a vague but deepening sense of responsibility on his own part. He was still unable, nevertheless, to master the violent attraction that the thing seemed to have for him from its very enormity.

"You know what, Andreina?" he said at last. "Not only should I not listen to you; I should prevent you from talking that way. But your proposal is so outlandish that I am anxious to understand just how you came by such a wild idea. From what you have said I gather that your motive is not money, nor hate either. Well, what is it? Why kill her?"

Andreina pondered her words:

"You are wrong in saying that I do not want her money. I do, very, very much. As for hating Maria Luisa, I hate her with all the hate there is or could be in my soul—the way I hate other people who do not know what they want, what they are doing, where they come from, where they are going, who they are. Such people would never be missed if they were put out of the way. Yet they hang around, making the world a pesthouse in which nobody else can live. Maria Luisa? A rag of a woman! How could anyone help hating her?" She paused for a moment. The cruel expression in her eyes, the tremor in her nostrils, the ring of her voice, all bore witness to the depth and sincerity of the hatred she was confessing to. "Yet you are right," she resumed thoughtfully, "in saying that hate and money are not my main motives. There's something else. I doubt if I can explain it exactly. Suppose I put it this way: It's a sense of fairness, of justice."

Pietro looked at her, sorrowful, frightened. He shook his head and began:

"I can see, Andreina, that we have nothing in common except this love that I have for you and which I hope you return. That love, I am certain, will in the end get the better of the saddening and absurd things that your unhappy life has packed into your head. In any case, if similarity there be, it cannot lie in the wicked side of us. Believe me, you are not as bad as you enjoy pretending to be. And that is why——"

She broke him off. Her exhilaration had come over her again. She nestled closer to him, and closed his lips with her hand.

"You are wrong, Pietro! We are alike—we are alike! Like me you cannot live among these half-dead people in the false world they create for us. Like me your mission in life is to cheat such people, ruin them, use them—rags and masks that they are! And that is why I love you. Don't be afraid of remorse! No such thing exists among people like us. If we are strong enough to do the thing I mentioned, we are strong enough not to feel any remorse afterwards." She paused for breath. One of the shoulder straps of her dress had slipped down. She put it back in place. "The only thing we really have to think about is acting calmly and being perfectly wide awake. We must not go about this in a mood of despair, and therefore of indifference to consequences. We must act naturally, in full awareness that our whole future depends on the outcome of what we do."

It seemed clear enough to Pietro that, in spite of her frenzied state of mind, Andreina was continually trying to give her ranting an appearance of lucidity, responsibility, mature thought. And then it suddenly occurred to him that the fascination he himself felt for the girl's lugubrious scheming would not end till he decided to stifle it by an act of will. Andreina, in fact, had a sort of morbid energy that did not wane in the face of arguments and explanations but seemed to gather power from them. It would be better, therefore, to cease this prying and analysing once and for all and, by refusing to talk further, extricate himself from the dangerous snares into which curiosity and experimenting were leading him.

"Let go of me!" he commanded, without moving, and looking straight into the eyes that gleamed so close to his. "And never talk this way to me again! You may be sure that I shall not only not do as you propose, but that in one way or another I shall compel you to do as I propose."

"All that that means is that you are afraid," returned Andreina, calm, cold. "You are a coward."

They looked at each other.

"I am not a coward," said Pietro, severely, "and you know that I am not. You say that I am just to provoke me into promising something that I shall of course never promise."

He freed himself without difficulty from the girl's embrace, rose to his feet, and began pacing up and down the room. Andreina resumed the posture she had had at first, lying prone on the bed with her face buried in the pillow and an arm thrown across her head. The black lace on her gown drooped in a soft transparent cascade about her light-coloured stockings. Her feet, awkwardly separated in an inert, uncomfortable pose, offered a strange contrast with the magnificent body that bulged in joyous, graceful lines in its tight-fitting sheath of glossy satin. She seemed to be thinking, and perhaps weeping.

Some moments passed that way. Finally Andreina turned her head a very little, and raised her arm till she could see Pietro with one eye.

"You can do as you wish," she declared. "But I want you to know that I am fairly well along with my plans."

"What plans?"

"Look in the second drawer there, in the bureau. On the right side you will find a box lined with blue silk. Take it out and open it."

She again turned her face into the pillow, as though she preferred not to see what he was about to discover.

For a second Pietro looked at her in amazement. Then he went to the bureau and opened the drawer.

Under a covering of soft silken articles he found the box and opened it. He saw that it contained a number of handkerchiefs and then a dozen or more rings and bracelets, all with diamonds. He could not understand at first just what it was that should strike his attention. He assumed that the jewels belonged to Andreina and that something else might be hidden among the handkerchiefs or perhaps inside the lining of the box. Then, suddenly, the extraordinary brilliancy of the gems caught his interest and a wave of bitter anguish swept over him.

"What are these?" he asked, hardly able to utter the words.

Andreina looked around as before, and replied slowly:

"Maria Luisa's jewels! They figured in the robbery a month ago—remember? It happened that day we all four met in the bakery. . . . They found a window wide open and the police never got any farther than that."

In the ensuing silence Pietro looked into the opened box again. There were, as he counted, five rings, three with altogether exceptional diamonds; then three bracelets, all very broad and very costly, with many stones set close together in arabesques. Finally came a diamond necklace, very heavy and of incalculable worth! He was too dazed to think. Merely to look at the jewels taxed his courage. Suddenly a design with a monogram on the corner of a handkerchief caught his eye. It was a coronet of the marquisate, and he made out two letters: *M. T.*

"The handkerchiefs too are hers?" he gasped.

"All hers!" answered Andreina, this time without moving or raising her head. "The box was taken and brought here with everything inside. There were some letters and photographs. Those I destroyed."

Pietro closed the box and returned it to the drawer again. Then he went back to the bed and sat down on the edge, looking at the prostrate woman in silence. In spite of his overpowering dismay he could not help feeling that same sense of shuddering, fascinated curiosity, a criminal weakness that he knew he should master but could not. Almost involuntarily he bent over and touched a finger to Andreina's shoulder.

"How did those jewels get here?" he asked.

She turned her head far enough to show half of a cold, gloomy, suspicious face.

"They were brought here by the person who stole them."

"Who was that person?"

She looked at him again in expert, diffident appraisal.

"I don't mind telling you," she said at last. "However, you must promise never to tell anybody else."

What struck Pietro most forcibly was the criminal experience that Andreina seemed to betray by her cold, self-contained manner. He answered, nevertheless:

"Very well—I promise."

Andreina turned over and sat up on the bed in order to tell her story better. As she spoke, she bent forward, lowering her head and gazing dreamily at her feet. They lay still spread far apart with the toes pointing outwards.

"Have you ever been at Maria Luisa's new place?" she began.

Pietro nodded.

"Well, did you notice a maid she has—the only one, for that matter—a short, strong-looking sort of person?"

"Yes, I know the maid. She always smiles at you in a silly manner, as though she were making a fool of you in a way you don't understand."

"That's the one," continued Andreina, without raising her head. She spoke with a bitter, meditative slowness, as though her words were a sour grass that she were slowly masticating and then spitting out. "She was maid in our house while I was still living at home. She helped me get away and worked for me as a maid during my first years in Milan. She was the one—though I didn't know it till afterwards—who introduced Matteo to me. He paid her for it. However, that makes no difference. I am sure she thought she was doing me a good turn. When Matteo began coming here, I had him arrange for the Tanzillos to take her as their maid. A month ago she stole those jewels as a favour to me, and brought them here."

Pietro dropped his eyes, his teeth pressing deep into his lower lip. The thing was growing complicated, he could see, in a dark and terrible way. So long as it had been a matter of talking and arguing, there had still been hope. But that maid, those jewels—they were facts. And it was with facts, not words, that the lives and characters of men were moulded and determined. Those facts could be met only with other facts, facts as serious and as compromising as the first facts had been, and Andreina would have to have a share in them, applying herself to them with the same tenacity and passion that she had hitherto manifested in her criminal designs. It would be hard to manage that!

He suddenly spoke:

"Don't imagine I approve of all this that has been going on. I not only do not approve—it horrifies me! I would, however, like to ask you a question. Does Maria Luisa absolutely have to die? Those gems represent a very considerable fortune. If not for a lifetime, they would keep you for a good long while."

They looked at each other. When Andreina spoke, it was with a sort of icy, deprecating resentment:

"You take me for a sneak thief? Judge for yourself! Those jewels have been there for a good month. They are a nuisance. I can't imagine what to do with them. Naturally I should never have dreamed of taking them to wear myself. No, I wanted to get them just to see"—she looked up and studied him intently—"just to see whether it could be done, as a step towards doing something else! . . . Well, I'm going on, and you are going to help me! . . ."

"Something else? What else?"

Andreina's eyes flamed, and the same cruel and sensuous quiver reappeared about her nostrils.

"I told you what," she said, in her hushed, quiet voice.

A great irritation came over Pietro.

"You had better ask your maid for that, not me!" he cried angrily. "She has stolen for you. She might do that too."

"Oh, I'm sure she would," assented Andreina, quietly. "That is, if I asked her to! She is really devoted to me. But, you see, she doesn't understand me. She sees only the money involved. She thinks I am doing all this for the money there is in it. So I'm not going to ask her. You, instead, are a person of my kind. You understand me. Besides, I love you. That is why I want your help."

"How is that?"

"In the first place," said Andreina, in the same hushed voice, "I don't want the person I love to be different from me, or my superior. In the second place, after doing a thing like that, you would be bound to me for the rest of your life."

Pietro rose and began pacing the floor again.

"What did you mean," he finally asked, "when you said that you were fairly well along with your plans?"

"I meant that I have planned to do the thing myself, and bring you in whether you are willing or not!"

This time Pietro was not so much angry as stunned, though through the fog in his mind he could discern that same anguished but irresistible curiosity.

"You are a monster, Andreina!" he said, stopping suddenly at the bedside. "It would serve you right if . . ."

"Yes, go and tell the police!" she remarked, calm, cold, without moving.

Pietro shrugged his shoulders and took a few more paces around the room. Then he halted at the bedside again.

"What frightens me most in you," he said, "is your very indifference to money in all this. I wish you were the way that maid of yours thinks you are: greedy for money."

Andreina looked up.

"Don't be afraid," she said quietly. "I want the money all right. If it weren't for the money, I wouldn't be interested in Maria Luisa in particular. She is rich. . . . However, what really stirs me is the unfairness!"

She looked at Pietro with a pallid smile, as though she were viewing him at a distance so great that any word they might exchange would be inaudible. She looked at him, and meanwhile kept shaking her head, while her distraught fingers toyed with the satin that covered her knees. Pietro considered her hands. In them he seemed to find expressed a roving impotent unhappiness that did not speak from her features. When he looked at her face, he saw that two tears had overflowed from her opened motionless eyes and trickled down her cheeks. Two others were sparkling on the rims of her lids. She was weeping.

Stirred in his turn, Pietro thought of sitting down beside her and again trying in some way to console her. But then, very distinctly through the closed door, he heard the bell ring at the other end of the hall.

"There's someone at the door," he could not help exclaiming. "Shall I go and see who it is?"

"It's Rosa!" she replied without looking up or drying her tears. "Let her in."

Pietro went out into the corridor, wondering who Rosa might be. Suspecting a visit from the thief, he felt in advance towards her the same sort of hateful loathing that he had for Stefano. Would he never succeed in freeing Andreina from the abject characters that crowded her past? He removed the chain and opened the door.

In the woman who appeared beyond the threshold he recognized readily enough Maria Luisa's dishonest maid. She was attired in a strange garb that seemed designed to set off all the defects of her person. A light coat, with a fur collar and trimmings, reached far enough below her knees to call attention to her strong bowed legs and give her a curious appearance of deformed, plebeian robustness. The same squatty, robust impression was carried on by a flattish broad-brimmed hat that she wore low down over her eyes. She looked like a toadstool with its cap perched on its stem. She seemed to be not at all embarrassed by the presence of Pietro. She raised her eyes and looked at him with the surprised attention one might have for a person one has heard much talked about but never seen.

"I beg your pardon," she said, with a servile humility. "I have come to see Signora Andreina, if she is in."

Paralysed by his curiosity and his repugnance, Pietro stepped aside. With a servile drop of her head the woman passed in front of him into the vestibule, then of her own accord went on into the corridor.

For a second Pietro stood there in the doorway. His loathing all but had the best of him. He was tempted to seize his hat and coat then and there and make good his escape, leaving the two thieves to their despicable conference. But once more his passion for Andreina was stronger than his disgust. He shut the door and followed after the woman.

Quite familiar with the apartment, Rosa went straight to Andreina's room. The door was open, and she halted for a moment on the threshold, gazing in astonishment at the scene that offered itself to her eyes—Andreina sitting in the middle of the bed in evening clothes, with her hair in disarray and tears streaming down her face. Indifferent to Pietro's approach behind her, she rushed to the weeping woman.

"What has happened?" she asked, sitting down on the bed and throwing her arms about her former mistress. "What have they done to you? Why are you crying?"

While delivering this series of questions, she was readjusting Andreina's shoulder strap, which had slipped down again, and was patting her hair with her hands to smooth it into better order.

But the woman's presence seemed to release Andreina from such self-control as she had been maintaining. She threw her arms about Rosa's neck and began to sob violently, her whole body shaking. The woman sought for a moment to calm her, speaking to her tenderly and stroking her hair. Then suddenly, with a single energetic sweep, she threw her hat aside, put her long, flat black hair into place with a shake of her head and a pat or two with her hands, and then turned on Pietro.

"Why you have to make her cry that way," she railed, bitterly, "is more than I can see. Ever since my mistress has been with you she has not known a moment's happiness. If you can only treat her that way, it would be much better if you would let her alone and go off and torment some other girl."

For a moment Pietro looked at the two women as though dazed. Then an unthinking rage got the better of him.

"You wretch! You thief!" he cried furiously. "Who was it that ruined Andreina in the first place by giving her over to Tanzillo, and then by making her the receiver of stolen jewels? Who was it that filled her head with no end of wrong ideas and brought out her worst instincts? Was it I?" He suddenly became aware that the door was open. He stepped over and closed it. "You can thank your lucky stars," he resumed, "that you have involved Andreina in this foul business too. Otherwise no one could keep me from going straight to the police and handing you over as the thief you are."

"Do lie down, and don't cry so hard!" said the woman to Andreina, coaxing.

Then she turned on Pietro again, and smiling her usual ambiguous smile, challenged:

"You just tell on me to the police! I will go to prison, that's sure! But I have someone handy who will make you sorry for getting me into trouble—I can tell you that!"

Pietro's rage was too great to permit him to catch the overt threat.

"If I don't have you arrested," he resumed, "it's only out of consideration for Andreina. But you are going to be punished just the same. You will get nothing from your stealing. I am going to take those jewels, box and all, and," he added, somewhat vaguely, "I'll get them back to Maria Luisa in due time."

So saying, he stepped to the bureau, opened the drawer, and took out the box with the blue silk lining.

If the threat of arrest had little apparent effect on the woman, not so this sudden and unexpected action on the part of the young man. Rosa let go of Andreina, rushed upon Pietro, and snatched the box from his hands.

"Don't you touch a finger to our jewels!" she threatened, hiding the treasure behind her and backing for better defence against the bureau. "Go away from here! Go away, and let us alone!"

"I'll let you alone!" cried Pietro, advancing upon her. "Give me that box, you thief, and prepare to leave your present place at once. I will find a way to have you discharged by Maria Luisa."

"And I," said the woman, "will find a way to let Signorina Sofia know the way you are carrying on in my mistress's house."

She turned and put the box in the drawer again, closing the latter with a push with her back.

"Oh, stop quarrelling—both of you!" cried Andreina, at this point, from her seat on the bed, bored. She had dried her tears and was looking at them with a cold, weary expression on her face. "Come here to me, Rosa! Give him the jewels immediately, if he will consent to take them. Don't worry! He won't give them back to Maria Luisa! . . . And he won't sell them! . . ." She looked at Pietro deeply. "He will simply keep them much more safely than I could here."

Pietro bit his lips and stepped away from the bureau. "She is just trying to get me involved, along with herself and this fine rogue of a maid," he thought. He took a stool, went to the door, and sat down in the doorway. The maid had returned to Andreina. She picked up one of her mistress's hands and sat stroking it.

There was silence for a time. Then Andreina spoke in her hushed voice, but with a querulous intonation:

"Rosa, I want you to be respectful to this friend of mine. I want you to love him. It was not his fault if I was in tears. And you, Pietro, must think of Rosa as a friend of mine. You cannot know all that I owe her, nor what might have become of me had it not been for her. Now shake hands, the two of you, to prove that you cherish no grudges!"

"Now I'm friends with a thieving servant!" Pietro reflected. Without obeying Andreina's injunction, without even looking at the maid, he rose to his feet, at the end of his endurance.

"I'm sorry," he said coldly, "I prefer to keep my grudge. I must be going. It's late and I have not had dinner."

"I'll show you out!" said Andreina, quickly seizing the chance, and with a sudden movement she slipped to the floor and rose to her feet. She looked around her for a moment, motionless, pale. "I wonder if I'm ill? I feel dizzy! . . . Rosa," she called faintly, as though about to collapse, "won't you go into the bathroom and get me my smelling-salts?"

The maid rushed eagerly to obey.

Seizing the opportunity, Andreina ran to the bureau with an agility that her previous attitude would not have suggested, opened the drawer, and took out the silk-lined box.

"Come," she said to Pietro, cold, imperious, taking him by an arm and pushing him towards the door. "It's time you were going."

They reached the corridor. What concerned Pietro most was not the disturbed and equivocal demeanour of his mistress, but the box she carried under her arm. "There's no doubt," he thought, "that she took the box in order to give it to me and so implicate me in this dirty affair. But she is making a mistake if she thinks I am not going to get those jewels back to Maria Luisa!" However, this deadly obstinacy of Andreina in trying to ruin herself still filled him with the same incredulous and plaintive curiosity.

"Andreina," he suddenly said, slipping an arm about her waist, "what is the real meaning of all this?"

"All what?" she asked, dropping her eyes as though to make sure where she was putting her feet.

Pietro shook his head, reproachfully.

"You can pretend all you want to, but I am sure that you are not going on in this atmosphere very much longer. This, I am convinced, is just a dark period from which you will find a way of escaping. But it has to be a good way, Andreina. We mustn't lose heart. We must go forward."

They had come to the reception-room.

"Yes," she said, "we must go forward! . . . Now give me a kiss—and good night."

She threw her arms about his neck and held up her lips to him. But while Pietro was bending forward he could feel that in spite of her caress, she was forcing the box, with a stealthy but imperious violence, under his arm. For a moment, angry, Pietro thought of rejecting that strange sort of gift. He changed his mind and closed his arm upon it. Andreina ended her embrace at once, as though it had been a mere pretext for transferring the jewels to him. Then she drew back, hurried to the clothes-rack, and took down his hat and overcoat.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said, handing them to him.

Pietro laid the box on the centre table, put on his overcoat, then picked up the box again.

"I will take charge of these things," he said, looking at her steadily as he backed out through the door. "However, that does not mean that I am in league with you. We shall have to find some way to return everything to Maria Luisa."

Andreina made no reply, save a cold toss of her head that seemed to express complete indifference. "Do anything you please with them!" Then she dropped her eyes and, looking intently at the sill in front of her, slowly closed the door.

XIII

OUTSIDE, instead of the depressing calm that had prevailed at the time of his return to Andreina's, Pietro found a cold, gusty wind blowing—a change in no sense foretold by the warmish humid winter's day that had closed. Cleansed of the mists from the river, the air was unusually limpid. The dark outlines of the houses were clearly discernible, with eaves and cornices, roof-houses, chimneys, lighted rectangular windows, and through the windows the interiors of rooms. The cloud bank had been torn to shreds by the powerful gale, and like the sails of a squadron defeated in battle, the shreds were in flight towards a far horizon, leaving the zenith clear and bright with stars. But the wind was not content with its victory over dampness and cloud. It continued blowing furiously. Ropes and wires could be heard flapping in sharp strident notes from the rooftops. Waste paper and last remnants of fallen leaves scraped along the dry sidewalks. Squalls would roar in tumultuous eddies around the street corners, dash heavy and disordered down the stretches of open pavement, and then whirl skyward with a shrill plaintive whistling.

But apart from the noises of the gale the deserted avenue lay in complete silence. There was no humming of automobile engines, no clacking of pedestrians' heels on stone flags, and that loneliness seemed to lend greater relief to the mute oscillations of light and shadow that were cast over the pavement and the walls of the buildings by the street lamps as they swayed at the ends of their metal supports.

On closing the gate behind him Pietro looked doubtfully along the drive, then at the white wisps of cloud in mad flight across the sky, finally at a few bright stars that glittered cold above his head in the wintry sky.

His hesitation did not derive from any vagueness of purpose or any uncertainty as to where he was going. His mind was perfectly clear and he knew that he was going to Sofia's. However, at the time of his last meeting with his fiancée, his mind had been made up. He had been resolved to break with Sofia and marry Andreina. Now unforeseen elements had suddenly injected themselves into his situation—new facts had come to light. They might occasion some change in his plans. At the very least, they required thinking over. "First it was just talking and arguing, and no harm in that! One could ascribe it to an erratic but harmless twist of character. But stolen jewels? In collusion with a dishonest maid? One cannot say that I am not acting with the full knowledge of what I am doing. If I marry Andreina, I marry a criminal! What people are really like, when you get to know them!"

The thought that insisted on crowding to the forefront in his meditation was that he was still in time, if he chose, to clear his traces altogether and go back to the situation as it had been before he met Andreina. "Neither Matteo nor Sofia knows or suspects anything," he thought, resting his elbows on the parapet along the drive, and bending over to look at the river. "A well-turned sentence or two for Andreina—well-turned sentences come easy to me, alas—something to whitewash my cowardice and at the same time console her for losing the jewels! . . . Then a touching farewell, and everything turns out all right: I marry Sofia, and Andreina goes on with her career! Of course, some fine day, years hence, when I have come to be somebody, middle-aged, respected, I square myself with Sofia. 'Do you remember,' I say to her, 'that Andreina person—that girl Matteo used to keep? What you never guessed was that she was my mistress too! And then that business of Maria Luisa's jewels! Andreina was the one who stole them! Imagine that! Oh, a strange creature, she was! Mad? Mad as a hatter! A lunatic!' And to fix up the end of the story, I might borrow a line from Davico: 'She has been the great remorse of my life!' "

But Pietro was perfectly aware of the baseness of that sort of conduct. In fact its baseness had never seemed to him more evident and inexcusable, and at the same time, more alluring and plausibly defensible. What man, he reflected, when placed in my situation, would hesitate? Who would ever give up a good girl, rich, and with a title, in order to marry a lunatic who was also a thief? Baseness, to be sure! But would there not be a whole lifetime to make up for the baseness, with plenty to spare? Life would furnish opportunities without number for him to prove his noble-mindedness, his unselfishness, his altruism! Why walk open-eyed, therefore, into a trap that had been set for him? Besides—the situation itself! Could not a thousand ways be found to patch everything up without any real harm to anybody, and without any great noise? What else was life except compromise, manœuvring, wisdom? Was a fellow always required to choose between extremes—either baseness or heroism? Furthermore, why insist on making a girl over into a person she was not and would never be? Why insist on meddling in things that were no concern of his? Why insist on living other people's lives for them? Why not let Andreina go her own way? . . .

Such the tempting voices that chimed discordantly in Pietro's brain, seeming to blend, faint and insinuating though they were, with the disorderly turmoil of the wind that was howling around him. At his post there at the parapet, Pietro listened to them, with his face beaten by the gale and his eyes gazing down into the black current of the river.

But as he listened to them he could not keep from reassuring himself repeatedly that, in the end, in spite of the dread and apprehension that an uncertain future inspired in him, he would leave the rich and noble Sofia to marry the poor outcast thief, Andreina. "Were it only not to do as Stefano did, when he seduced and deserted her! Were it only not to feel myself the equal of a man whom I despise and I think that I have a right to despise!" But beyond that consideration of vanity there came another—less definable, deeper. It made him feel that any drawing back was impossible even after his discovery about the jewels. He still had a conviction that he could change Andreina, or better, that he could help her to find herself again, a feeling that he possessed human resources that would be able to overcome any obstacle and rectify any condition however averse. The discovery that, in addition to possessing defects that he already knew, Andreina was a real and practised criminal in no way weakened that feeling—in fact it seemed to strengthen it in ratio with the new difficulties. Only, it would be necessary to force Andreina to perform an act that would constitute a complete break with her past life and at the same time illumine the road to a new one. What act could that be? There seemed to be no doubt about it! He should force Andreina to return the jewels to Maria Luisa of her own accord. The restitution would be hard and humiliating, but also necessary, unavoidable! Then, after that act, he should force her to subscribe to a still deeper and more solemn pledge—he would force her to marry him!

A clock in a tower beyond the river began to strike in slow, measured beats. He counted them and noted that it was getting late, that he had barely time to rush to Sofia's before the gate was closed and the butler had retired for the night.

He had started off for the nearest bridge, when he thought of the box under his arm. Would it not be dangerous to appear at the Tanzillos' with that well-known and easily recognizable casket in his possession? He decided, therefore, to throw the box away and keep the jewels loose in his pocket. Where then should he throw it?

The river seemed the most likely place. He stepped up to the parapet again, gave a glance around, and was about to open the box and remove the jewels, when he felt a hand fall heavily upon his shoulder. His knees sagged from a frigid terror that all but stopped his heart. "I am caught!" he thought. In spite of his fright he still had sense enough to put the box back under his arm and turn around with a pretence at self-possession. In front of him he could see a city patrolman, easily recognizable from the black helmet that was pressed down over the man's eyes and from the brass buttons on his long black coat.

They looked at each other. Pietro's heart pounded violently. The steady gaze that came from under the helmet, the immobility of the man, the silence and solitude of the environment, struck him as so many certain signs of imminent disaster.

"Yes?" he finally managed to gasp.

"What time is it?" the patrolman asked with an intonation that took Pietro back. It was a tone not of command but of polite inquiry. "I am waiting for my relief on this beat. I believe he's late. Can you give me the exact hour, please?"

With a glance at his wrist Pietro was able to satisfy him. The guard turned on his heel and walked leisurely away under the trees of the garden. "Damn the man!" muttered Pietro to himself. "Scare a fellow that way!" He thought it absurd that along with uniform, helmet, leather boots, revolver, and night-stick, the government had not thought of providing such people with a bell to wear around their necks. "Damn the man!" he repeated, drawing a deep painful breath.

This time he made really sure that no one was in the neighbourhood. Then he rested the box on the parapet again and opened it. How the diamonds gleamed as they lay in a confused mass together, especially those that caught the faint steady glow of the nearest street lamp! He took all the jewels in one hand and emptied them into a coat pocket. The handkerchiefs he put into another. Then he closed the box and threw it at the river. But whether because it was too light or because it met a contrary gust of wind, it did not reach the water. Bending over the parapet with a hand to the brim of his hat and his eyes peering down into the dark, Pietro saw it open, flit about, and finally fall upon the bank, which at that point seemed rather wide and muddy.

For a time he stood as he was, bending over and peering down, trying to persuade himself that he could go his way leaving the object where it had fallen. Then with a sense of violent anger he understood that such carelessness on his part was not conceivable. The box was lying almost in front of Andreina's house and it might occur to someone to associate it with her. "Damn it! Damn it!" he muttered, prey to an insufferable irritation. "Now I shall have to get down there somehow and throw that box into the water! What have I ever done that I should be punished this way?" He grated his teeth, though a scream might better have satisfied him.

Controlling his feelings with a great effort, he took the bearings of the spot where the box lay and then started out to look for a ramp or a flight of steps that would afford him access to the river bank. He found one about a quarter of a mile farther along at one of the main bridges of the city.

The steps were steep and slippery. Clinging firmly to the slimy balustrade Pietro went down two long flights and then began to pick his way back along the shore. The mud was of that special kind of silt that is left by flooding rivers. At one moment he would slip on it, at the next it would be sticking in such masses to his shoes that he would have to stop and clean them. He would stumble over heaps of rubbish and then hear bits of it slide into a near-by water that he could not see. Every so often his toe would strike an empty tin and send it rolling. Whenever he took his eyes from the ground ahead of him and looked at the stream, he could make out a cold dark surface covered with bubbles and wrinkled swellings that glistened in the light they caught from the street lamps. The water was apparently as motionless as a pond in a marsh, except at a point where the lights of a scow that was moored to the shore played full upon it. There he could see eddies and whirlpools rushing along at a silent but surprising speed. He was annoyed, less by the difficulties of the ground than by the great height of the dikes. They gave him a feeling of being caught in the slime and filth of that river bottom so that he never would get out of it again. Unwilling to admit the impression, he nevertheless could not help regarding his mishap with the box as something sinister and of evil augury. He was trying to redeem Andreina, and she was forcing him into these terrors and subterfuges! There was a much better chance that she would make a rogue of him than there was that he would make an angel of her! But there, at last, was the box! He picked up the hateful thing. Yielding to a sort of vengeful fascination, he thought he would examine it before throwing it away again. He was pleased to note that it was soiled with mud. "So it ought to be!" he thought, as he hurled it as far out as he could into the dark water.

Turning back he could see the bridge that he had left and that was now his goal. Black and inaccessible it towered in a far distance, with its squatty arcades looking like black half-circles, while the parapets were lines of light, along which trams as small as toys were creeping, sputtering sheets of bluish flame from the trolley wires. Upwards from the bridge rose the starred vault of the night, and as Pietro made his way along in the slimy trench it seemed to him that the sky had never seemed so vast, nor the constellations that were sprinkled at far intervals over it so bright and mysterious. A spark darted from one corner of the wintry heavens, made a dusty streak of light, and vanished. Faithful to an instinctive superstition, he murmured a wish: "May all go well! May I succeed in saving Andreina!"

He made the return journey much more quickly than he had foreseen. He reclimbed the steep stairs that led up to the level of the bridge. A taxicab crossed at just that moment, headed towards town. Pietro hailed it and leapt in, shouting the address to the driver. Five minutes later he was ringing the Tanzillo bell.

XIV

Maria Luisa's jewels made a conspicuous bulge in the left pocket of his coat. As soon as he reached the parlour and the butler who had shown him in had retired, he took the necklace and a few rings and thrust them into a pocket in his trousers.

The parlour was a little room with a low ceiling and deep-set windows, the first of a series of five similar rooms leading one into the other—a makeshift for the large and majestic drawing-room that Maria Luisa had dreamed of but that the special construction of the old convent had made impossible. In a corner of the room the butler had lighted a floor lamp on a tall iron stand that was topped with a broad blue shade with gold trimmings, crookedly set. The faint half-light that resulted seemed to add relief to the bad taste of the furnishings and the numerous gadgets. The chairs, stands, and tables for the most part were in a baroque exotic style, lacquered, inlaid, and minutely carved. The various articles rose at all points in the narrow, shadowy room, crowding it in a strange, weird way, as though they were living organisms that could actually breathe. The over-furnished impression was intensified by a number of tall, thick, luxuriant plants, dark-leaved but without blossoms. They were sprinkled about in red, yellow, or blue china vases, filling the corners and the window-seats with their viscous palpitating immobility. As in the dining-room on the floor below, the first parlour was separated from the next beyond by an arch decorated with a gold-leaf design that eventually wreathed a strident coat of arms of the Tanzillos. Beyond the arch, the light from the tall iron floor lamp became a faint glow that was spread unequally over other glittering mahogany presences and other masses of viscous foliage. A forbidding hostile gloom filled most of this second room to become an impenetrable black beyond the doors succeeding.

"This is my chance to get somewhere!" thought Pietro as he paced about over the thick felt-padded rug in the little space that was left him by the framing of plants and furniture. All his nerves were on edge, but—a curious fact that did not escape him—he knew that his uneasiness derived more from the stolen jewels that he had in his pocket than from the grave decision he was about to impart. Finally he could resist no longer. He sat down in a chair near the fireplace, drew the diamond necklace from his pocket, and began carefully to examine it in the light that came from the iron floor lamp.

The ornament was an imitation of the fantastic girdles of the African Negroes, made of a number of diamonds all of the same size and set in octagonal plaques of platinum that were in turn connected with each other by other plaques, also of platinum but inlaid with lines of onyx and gold. What with the gems and the precious metals it must have had a considerable value, though it was not in order to determine that figure that Pietro drew it from his pocket and began to look at it. The fact that interested him was that it had been stolen and was now in his possession. He could see Maria Luisa entering the Tanzillo dining-room at the time of their last meeting, proud, hesitant, wearing that dazzling blaze of gems around her weary, impure throat. It was hard for him to realize that those had been the very stones that he was now holding in his hands. Another thing that filled him with a sinister, half-incredulous stupefaction was that Andreina had been able to go to such lengths, that the woman who had stolen the jewels was the woman who had talked of murdering Maria Luisa and the woman whom he had resolved to marry. "Andreina views our future as nothing less than a partnership in crime," he reflected at that point, coldly. "But, as she says, those are words, just words—marriage, crime, vice, virtue. Well, words then! But in that case a task is set for me. It is for me to give meanings to those words!"

He heard a clatter of slippers on the marble threshold of the drawing-room, and again in fright he thrust the necklace into his pocket.

Her loose-jointed, undulating body wrapped in a blue dressing-gown, her bare feet thrust into mules with wooden heels, her dark face glistening from some unguent or other, her long black curls in great disorder, Sofia was advancing towards him, apparently just coming from her bath.

"A pretty time of day to call on people!" she cried, shaking her head of hair and swaying at the hips. "It's only by chance that I happen to be in. They'll soon be here to take me to Costanza's party. When you were announced—imagine—I was in the tub. I dried myself after a fashion, and slipped this wrapper on. I warn you that I have not more than five minutes at your disposal. After that time I shall not listen to arguments—I shall go back upstairs and dress!" She had spoken in the voluble, fluent, verbose chatter that was habitual with her. "Brr . . . How cold it is!" she added. "You see, I'm not as dry as I might be!"

She stepped to the brick and stone fireplace that occupied the centre of the farther wall, knelt down, puffing, sighing, shivering, lighted a match, and applied it to the logs of wood that were piled on the andirons under the mantel. There was a little explosion as the gas caught fire—for the logs were counterfeit—and in place of a crackling burst of flame a fire-log glowed with little tongues of violent light. With a sigh of pleasure Sofia bent over low to collect as much as possible of the malodorous warmth.

These protracted operations had been executed to the growing impatience of Pietro, who stood stiffly erect in the middle of the room, coldly considering the fireplace and the bare-footed girl with the tumbled curls who was crouching under the mantel.

"Is Matteo in?" he suddenly asked.

"Don't mention Matteo to me!" answered Sofia without turning around. "I don't know what can have happened to him. He was in a beastly humour, hardly touched his dinner, and left immediately afterwards."

"I know what happened to him!" thought Pietro, and silent, disdainful, he took a few paces about the rug again.

Sofia, however, gave no sign of rising. He finally lost his temper.

"Please get up," he said, dryly. "I came to talk to you about a very serious matter."

Sofia rose and looked at him.

"What, then?"

"Suppose we sit down," said Pietro.

They took seats, one to the right, the other to the left of the fireplace, and for a moment neither spoke. Finally Sofia's dark glossy face took on an expression of amused astonishment.

"What's got into you now?" she asked. "You were in a great hurry to talk. Now you sit there mum."

Involuntarily Pietro's restless hand found its way to his trouser pocket and began to finger the diamond rings and pick at the locks of the bracelets. Finally he began, very deliberately:

"I have come for a very simple reason. Do you remember that some time ago I proposed that we break our engagement? You would not hear of such a thing at that time. Well, you were mistaken. I have come here tonight to renew the suggestion."

Sofia had been looking dreamily at the fire in the gas-log. Her eyes opened wide with a sort of horrified surprise, half earnest, half incredulous. She turned and gazed at him.

"Why, this thing is getting to be a mania of yours!" she exclaimed; and it was clear that she was not inclined to take the young man's declaration very seriously. "Every other week now you come and suggest that we drop the idea of marrying. You know what you remind me of? One of those stuck-up maids who think one can't get along without them and in order to extort a raise in pay come and give their notice every so often and ask for their discharge bonus. Might one know what is wrong with you? This afternoon everything seemed to be all right. Now at ten o'clock on the same day, no siree—there we are again! . . . I'll bet one thing," she added suddenly, clenching her fists and looking at him searchingly; "you have been seeing Maria Luisa again, and she, like a loving sister-in-law, has been filling your head with a second helping of the nonsense she served you the other time."

"No," answered Pietro, his fingers still playing with the jewels in his pocket. "No, I have not seen Maria Luisa—not since that time." He drew the hand from his pocket, picked up the poker from the rack, and began to tap with it on the soft, thick rug. "One can come to conclusions without anybody's putting one up to them. That's my case now. Maria Luisa has nothing to do with it, nor anybody else. I have not been urged—I have merely made a decision."

"But why the decision?" asked Sofia, irritated. "Such a decision must have a reason."

"Yes," replied Pietro, calm, inflexible, deliberate. "There is a reason. In the first place, I am not the same Pietro who, deceiving himself, deceived you, persuaded you that he was in love with you and in the end managed to persuade you to become engaged to him. In the second place, if that change does not seem sufficient to you, there is another reason, a very simple one that closes the door to any objection. Not only have I ceased to love you; I am in love with another woman."

Each of his words had been accompanied by a dull thud of the poker on the soft, thick carpet. He looked up and met the faithful, anguished eyes of Sofia.

"Who is the woman?" she asked, spitefully.

Most unexpectedly, just as Pietro was about to pronounce Andreina's name, he felt a twin sense of shame come over him, a shame that was moral and a shame that was social. He blushed red at the social station and professional status of his mistress, but also at a thought of the criminal intrigue that to an extent united them. He forced himself onward, however.

"I must first tell you that I not only love the woman but have also decided to marry her. After that I don't mind telling you her name. She is Andreina Caracci."

Sofia half-leapt from her chair.

"The Caracci woman?! No—no! You can't be in earnest!"

"I'm in deadly earnest!" answered Pietro. To have mentioned Andreina's name and announced his decision seemed to have exhausted all his strength. He felt himself suddenly wilt and drop away into a dark apathetic gloom that he had not foreseen. "I am as much in earnest as I can possibly be!"

Sofia's black eyes were ordinarily fixed and uncomprehending. Now under the pressure of powerful feelings they became as penetrating as gimlets.

"Now let's see!" she began. With a hasty, businesslike movement she tucked in the flowing sleeves of her wrapper and brushed back the mass of curls from her face. "Let's see! I feel as though I were dreaming. Let's see! Suppose we grant that you like the woman. But, Bébé, you can't, you simply can't, think of marrying her!"

"Why not?" asked Pietro. He had dropped his eyes and he thought that he had never been so unhappy in his whole life. "Why do I feel this way?" he asked himself, surprised by the weakness that had suddenly overpowered him, much as sleep overpowers the taker of a narcotic. "I don't see why not," he repeated after a moment, faintly.

"Because it would be insane, simply insane!" Sofia leaned forward from her chair. "One doesn't marry a woman like that. She may be beautiful, intelligent—anything you like. But after all—after all!—she's Matteo's mistress."

"Yes, she's Matteo's mistress," assented Pietro, mechanically.

"And then," continued Sofia hesitating, in a tone of reticence and disgust, "there's that Davico! I didn't say anything this afternoon, because there are topics that I do not like to discuss. Besides, they were matters that in no way concerned me. But that horrible Davico, that horrible brother of Maria Luisa—what was there between him and her?"

"Why, he seduced her when she was fourteen!" said Pietro, huskily, without raising his head. "The first man who kept her took her on at seventeen. He was a business man, fat, old, stingy. Since then she has had no end of others—I don't know how many."

"So you see!" said Sofia, warmly, catching her breath again and taking heart. "So you see! Seduced at fourteen, and who knows how many lovers she has had since then and will have hereafter! And you—you want to marry a woman like that! But just think a little, dear Bébé, and you'll see how mad it all is. Think of your career! Why, it would be ruin pure and simple for you! A woman like that, and who, moreover, makes no secret at all of what she is—who would ever receive her in a home? It would mean ostracism, seeing just nobody! Instead, what you ought to do is make a way for yourself in the world, see as many people as possible. Why, it would be the end of everything for you!"

"I know that," Pietro answered. As he spoke he could feel his depression weighing heavier and heavier upon him, nor could he shake it off, however hard he tried. "I also know," he added after a pause, slowly, in a hollow voice, as though seeking out his words before uttering them, "I also know that you would have made the ideal wife for me, that our marriage would have been a good marriage, that with your position you could have improved mine, that with you to back me I could have dropped this newspaper work and applied myself to some larger field—the diplomatic service perhaps. . . ."

"Yes," agreed Sofia, anxious. "Just so! You could go into the diplomatic service! . . . So you see? . . . You admit it yourself!"

"Besides," Pietro continued in the same hollow, monotonous tone, "if I do not love you exactly, I like you and am fond of you, and I would have turned out a good husband."

"Yes," said Sofia, stirred, leaning forward from her chair and trying to take his hands, "and I like you and am fond of you. So then—you see? Why don't we marry then?"

"I have considered all that," said Pietro, ignoring her question and withholding his hands. "I can say more than that. I can say that deep down in me I have a passionate yearning not to go ahead with what I have decided on, to marry you just the same. But"—at the word "but," the despondency that was weighing on him seemed to grow twice as heavy—"but in spite of the thousand reasons I have for drawing back, I believe that I shall leave you and marry her."

He paused, dropped his head again, and resumed his tapping on the rug with the poker. He felt neither happy nor unhappy after his victory over himself. He was simply dull, insensible, as though the deathlike gloom that had settled upon him were acting like a powerful sedative.

A long silence followed. Through those dark parlours one could hear the loud rhythmic beats of an old clock with heavy brass weights. The gas-log in the fireplace gave out a low monotonous purring sound like a cat contentedly sleeping. Every now and then a tempestuous gust of wind would blow along out of the night and shake the loose window as with a restless, madly capricious, and powerful hand. Sofia was still more astounded than grieved. Not once did she remove her perplexed, incredulous eyes from the young man.

Suddenly she returned to the attack:

"You say that you have a very real desire to marry me. Why do you do the opposite then? Really, Bébé, I don't understand you. You must admit that at the very least all you say is very inconsistent!"

"Yes, quite inconsistent!" nodded Pietro, with his head still lowered.

"Well then—I don't see!" And Sofia made a gesture of despair. "Why do a thing that you are sure is not wise, that you know will ruin you?"

"Because of that, perhaps!"

There was another silence.

"Oh, how well I recognize you!" cried Sofia, wringing her hands and looking at him in anguish. "How well I recognize you, Bébé, in this terrible desire to sacrifice yourself, in this blind spirit of abnegation! After all, you do not love the woman. She attracts you because you see what a wretch she is, and you imagine you can improve her lot. You know that in marrying her you would be ruining your career, and that is why you are determined to make her your wife. How much of you there is in that! You want to redeem her, make a new person of her! Even if she were worse than she is, a woman of the streets, a thief, a murderess, that would not lessen your zeal by a jot—it would be just pouring oil on fire. Oh, it's you all over, Bébé!"

So, one by one, Sofia had been setting before him, deformed, frozen, and made somewhat ridiculous by a language that was at once ingenuous and stereotyped, the motives that really underlay his conduct and to which his whole life had gradually been reducing itself. Stated in that parodied form, they seemed so fatuous and rhetorical that for a moment Pietro felt a fearful doubt of himself and disgust for all that he was doing. But then again, as he could not help reflecting, from what other motives should he be acting, if not those? Perhaps from motives of personal advantage, like Stefano? Another thing that impressed him was that his fiancée, quite unconsciously, had come so close to the truth. She had used the word "thief," and he sat there with his pockets full of stolen gems.

"You may be right," he said firmly, pondering. "I probably would marry her even if she were, as you say, a thief, or something worse. You may be right in saying that I want to redeem her. The word is pretentious and ridiculous. I would be satisfied, really, if she were to become a good wife. However, you have used the word. I'll keep it. I want to redeem her."

He paused and began tapping on the rug with the poker again. He felt mortally sad, as though all warmth had gone out of him, as though all fire in him had been extinguished. "Now she will recognize me even better!" he thought.

What more than anything else made Sofia aware that he was ending the engagement in all earnestness was his apathetic, resigned coldness. Feeling unable to rouse him from that apathy and to make him see things as she saw them, her stupor, irritation, and anger grew.

"But do stop pounding with that instrument—you would drive a saint mad!" she cried, and the angry gesture with which she emphasized the words drew the front of her wrapper open, allowing her dark lean chest to come into view. "Now listen to me! For one thing, you will never be able to make anything of that woman! She is one that will never change—her road is cut out for her. She will ruin your life, and that is all that will come of it. Then there's something else! Listen: You are in no condition to think now. You are in love. That woman is too much on your mind. Suppose then we agree to defer any decision for a month. During that time we shall not see each other and you will have time to think before doing anything irreparably foolish. Then we can meet and talk things over and see whether you still feel as you do now. How is that? Do you agree?"

She was bending forward in her chair in an attitude of entreaty, looking at him out of anxious eyes.

But Pietro shook his head.

"It's impossible!"

"What do you mean—impossible?" And there was a depth of pain in her tone. "After all we are engaged. I hope you are not going to refuse me this one little thing that I ask of you."

"It's impossible!" Pietro repeated, and he rose to his feet as though under an irresistible compulsion. "Besides, it would be useless."

He stood with lowered head, his hands thrust into his coat pockets. He was expecting some other word of entreaty, but the most complete silence ensued. When he looked up he saw that Sofia was weeping. Curled up on the edge of her chair she was looking into the fire, with her elbow resting on the arm of the chair and her right cheek in her hand, her head inclined upon her shoulder. In that position her curls were all on one side of her head, while the tears that gushed copiously from her opened eyes trickled diagonally across her glossy face, those from the left eye ending in her half-opened mouth, those from her right eye wetting the hand that supported her head.

Her tears annoyed Pietro. He was too depressed on his own account to feel able to console anybody else. Instead of speaking he stood as he was, erect, in the middle of the room, gazing in stupefied absorption at the weeping woman, and now and again rising on his toes and then sinking back upon his heels.

But his silence at that moment must have seemed to Sofia as bitterly significant as his words before had been. She suddenly turned on him and cried with a swift fury:

"Well, if you wish to go away, go! Why stand there like a post stuck in the ground? Haven't you said all you had to say? What are you waiting for?"

Was it a real dismissal? Was it a disguised invitation to continue the talk? Pietro did not trouble to find out. He thought he had nothing more to say that would not be superfluous. The door was open, and through it he could see the wooden balustrade of the stairs. He backed slowly and softly away on the thick rug, then seeing that Sofia was still looking into the fire and did not turn, he went on into the hall, and from the hall into the vestibule. He picked up his coat and hat, glanced at those walls that would never welcome him again, and opened the door.

He had taken not more than a step under the porte-cochère when he was almost run down by a big light-coloured car that came in at high speed and made a sudden stop directly in front of the entrance. The door of the car swung open and a young man appeared.

Slender, pale, very tall, with broad shoulders and a vulgar little head far too small for them, he was dressed in evening clothes without hat or overcoat. Pietro had met him from time to time at the Tanzillos' and knew he was Sofia's cousin. As he closed the door of the car, the youth recognized Pietro too.

"Can you tell me whether Sofia is ready?" he asked.

"Ready?" Pietro returned. "She was complaining that you were late!"

And without further concerning himself with the young man he walked on towards the garden.

A few moments later he was in his room at the hotel. He took off his hat and coat, and then sat down at a table strewn with papers, took his head in his hands, and tried to reflect on all that had been happening. But he could see at once that he was too fatigued, and especially too depressed, to be able to think coldly and in an orderly manner of the situation that confronted him. The only thing that he could clearly see was that the tremendous sadness that had settled upon him derived from a doubt, and that the doubt bore, not upon this detail or that, not upon this or that act of his, but upon his whole person and his whole life. After the bold decisions of that day, it was as though a treacherous and fragile nature insisted on having its revenge upon the will that had forced them, and a violent anguish suddenly displayed them before his mind as baseless, arbitrary, absurd. He doubted himself. He doubted Andreina. He was in doubt as to what he had done and was about to do. He doubted everything that was not starkly real, concretely tangible.

He took the jewels from his pocket, threw them upon the table, and sat there thinking. Tears filled his eyes, and through their veiling the gems sparkled with iridescent, evanescent glints. There was something ironical, something unbearable, about their radiance. He kept shaking his head to free his eyes of the tears.

PART
THREE

I

SUDDENLY, with the same mysterious calm and simplicity with which a speeding express train comes to a stop in the open country, Andreina's dreamless sleep broke off and she awoke. A black suffocating darkness filled the room. For a moment, still half asleep, with her faculties still scattered and reposing, she hesitated between a temptation to wake up entirely and an inclination to doze off again. The complete darkness, the silence, and the fact that she had not dreamed deprived her of any sense of time. It might have been high noon but it might just as well have been one of those anonymous hours of the night that have no known value or usefulness, since they are always passed in the timeless unconsciousness of sleep. Her dullness of mind and a sense of unrefreshed weariness inclined her to pick on the second hypothesis, and she was about to turn over without testing it further when, as she moved, the side of her body came into contact with another form that was lying under the covers beside her.

The touch gave her a sensation, not of fright, but of a blended repugnance, anguish, and sadness, inspired by a hated but irreparable reality that she had momentarily forgotten only to find it suddenly before her again. Her sleepiness vanished in a flash, and with her recollection of all that had taken place the evening before she recovered an exact and merciless awareness of the limits and characteristics of that same reality. It was as if someone were whispering to her out of the dark: "Yes, you were sleeping and therefore released from these worries. But now you are awake again. Do not deceive yourself! You are the Andreina who finds herself in this situation, who has done this thing and that thing, who is looking forward to this or that particular destiny. Do not imagine that you can be anybody else!" For a moment she lay motionless, savouring the unpleasant sensation. Then she drew herself up towards the head of the bed and turned on the light.

The room brightened with a yellowish glow that seemed no less weary and untidy than the garments and other disordered objects she could see lying about on the floor, on the chairs, everywhere. Her hair had fallen down over her eyes. She smoothed it back, yawned lazily, and looked at the clock. The hands were pointing to ten—ten in the morning. She looked in the other direction and contemplated the sleeping form of Stefano.

He was lying on his back, with the whole of his big powerful torso outside the sheets, and one arm curled over the top of his head. He was sleeping that noiseless placid sleep that is commonly ascribed to children and persons who have nothing on their consciences. The whiteness and thinness of his closed eyelids, the almost deceitful calm that overspread his face, the fact that he was not snoring or giving any other signs of heavy breathing, struck her as surprising, and it occurred to her that for some reason best known to him he might be feigning sleep.

But the sight of him filled her with too many deeper feelings for her to linger on that impression. How she hated him! Yet at the same time the spectacle before her had its attraction as something that she could not quite comprehend. "Why did I do this?" she asked herself, surveying the cripple through half-closed eyes and resting her head with its dishevelled hair on one shoulder. She remembered that in yielding the evening before she had manifested a rapture that she was far from feeling, overpowering her revulsion with a wilful rage that had been turned all upon herself. That memory, however, had faded now. It awakened no sort of suffering in her. If pain there had been, it had all evaporated in the cruel absurdity of this resumption of her old adventure. The fact that she had relived as a grown woman the episode that had ruined her as a child awakened no resentment in her. Indeed, now that she thought of it, curiosity as to just what such a repetition would be like seemed to her to have been the main force that had swayed her. Certainly it had been the one source of satisfaction in an experience that otherwise stirred only sentiments of fear and loathing.

On the other hand, she could feel only a deep horror at having again fallen under an influence from which she had fancied for a time that she had freed herself, and which she now recognized as the one that had more or less directly controlled her whole course of life. This second surrender seemed to prove to her beyond question that after years of separation and independence she had not succeeded in making herself anything different from the frightened misshapen soul that Stefano had created in a single day. And how created, besides? Not certainly of a clear and deliberate volition—that, after all, might have been a sign of comradeship and esteem! But out of a casual caprice on a momentary impulse, as a momentary satisfaction! The man's cruel indifference—which she thought was conscious and deliberate, but which really derived from the pettiness and baseness of Stefano's interests and desires—was perhaps the thing about him that she understood least and which therefore had the greatest fascination for her and caused her the greatest rage. "This is all a torment to me," she thought. "I am suffering. For him it's exactly as it was ten years ago—a mere matter of convenience! He wants a woman once in a while, and for lack of a better one he turns to me!"

She lay there looking at the man with fascinated, hating, loathing eyes, and time and again it occurred to her to pick up some heavy object—a candlestick, a statuette, the shaft of a floor lamp—and bring it down upon his head there, as he lay sleeping, once, twice, three times—enough times to make sure that he was dead! But each of such fierce fancyings gave ground before a thought that was perfectly definite and even more terrible. "No, he must live! We must all live! Only—today I shall do a thing that will change our lives so that there will be no turning back!" No, death would be too charitable and mild a vengeance! It would be much better to involve everybody in an irreparable act that would drag them all after her into the night of an indissoluble complicity.

Beyond the crime she was resolved to commit she could see a sort of open space, a broad outlook, a dark and unknown landscape, a black, cloud-draped, tempestuous Promised Land. In fact, with her last restraints and her last hopes gone, would she not find opening before her the future—a thing accursed, but still something new, and her own creation—that her thoughts had long been caressing so fondly?

These reflections, and even more the thought that her preparations and prearrangements were such as to guarantee complete success in her designs, calmed her somewhat and in the end distracted her from the engrossing spectacle of Stefano sleeping. She turned away, sat up, yawned again, smoothed her hair with her hands, then finally rose, put on a dressing-gown, and noiselessly slipped from the room.

The vestibule and the corridor were dark with that close, dusty, silent half-light that is peculiar to apartments that have not been aired and set in order after the night. "I'll bet that that Cecilia is not awake yet!" she exclaimed mentally, the thought of the lazy maid stirring in her an unconscious eagerness to pick a petty quarrel and satisfy a blind impulse to be harsh and cruel to someone. Dragging her slippers along the floor, drawing the edges of her dressing-gown up along her half-naked sides, shaking her head to free her face of the hair that kept falling over it, she walked to the end of the corridor and pushed open the kitchen door.

The room was empty, the window wide open, and from out of doors came a damp cold draught that made her shiver. Nevertheless, she approached the window and looked out. A strangely mortified nature displayed itself before her eyes. The ivy that covered the circuit wall hardly ten feet from where she was standing had never seemed to her so flabby, so black, so crowded. The bushes in the flower garden seemed to droop their leaves like dogs carrying their tails between their legs. All colours were veiled and, as it were, soiled by a thick, stationary atmosphere that had a sort of buzz to it. For a time she stood there, her teeth chattering from the cold, and gazed dreamily at the mottled gravel on the path and at the reddish sides of the building beyond the ivy-covered wall. Then she looked up at the sky. There was a ceiling of cloud, very low and very black. "It's going to storm!" she observed, half surprised, as though somehow the fact interested her. She turned away from the window and her eye fell on the stove. On it sat a large aluminum saucepan half full of dirty water with a scum of grease.

She strode out of the kitchen to the door of the maid's room across the corridor directly opposite. As she had foreseen, she found Cecilia sleeping, fully dressed, lying on her side, with the disordered blankets under her, her head resting on a hand, her mouth half open. There was a stupid expression on the girl's painted, powdered face. Evidently she had been up earlier and attended to morning chores; but then feeling sleepy again she had gone back to bed, certain that she would wake up by the time she was needed.

Andreina took off her slippers so as not to make any noise and advanced into the room. She knew that she was acting stupidly, meanly. "What am I doing? Have I come to this?" she asked herself. But that fleeting vision of her wretchedness was smothered under a cruel delight, a bitter eagerness, to plumb the depths of that same wretchedness.

The room could not have been more bare. The only furnishings were the tall, much warped iron bed on which the maid was sleeping, the tripod washstand with its bowl and pitcher, a small leather-covered trunk that stood on end in one corner, a cheap wooden dressing-table painted white but much soiled and littered with cheap powder boxes and vanity objects, a comb with broken teeth, a half-bald hair brush. The white-painted walls were dotted with the dried remains of mosquitoes that had been crushed on them during the summer months. The cobwebs in the corners, the dull polish on the floor, a certain close, greasy smell, gave the impression that Cecilia rarely extended to her own quarters the hurried cleanings that she made each morning about the other rooms in the apartment.

Cautiously, embarrassed in her movements by her dressing-gown, Andreina took a glass from the window-sill, filled it with water from the pitcher, and then tiptoed to the bedside. In the position in which the maid was lying, with the left side of her chest thrust against the pillow, the cut of her dress hung down to one side like a bag, and within it, pressed one against the other, could be seen her two freckled breasts covered with their white shiny skin. Andreina looked at the sleeping woman for a moment, then, carefully, deliberately, holding the hem of the dress away with her fingers and bending her head and squinting her eyes the better to see what she was doing, she allowed a trickle of the icy water to fall exactly in the furrow between the maid's two breasts. Cecilia gave a start and moved her head. Whereupon in one dash Andreina emptied the whole glass into the opening in the gown. The maid opened her eyes and looked at her feet. Then she put a hand to her chest and gave a hoarse, whimpering cry that seemed to be a blend of disgust, surprise, and indignation. Perceiving Andreina at the bedside with the glass in her hand, she arose with a leap.

"You threw that water on me!" she cried. Without waiting for an answer, shaking her sides and her shoulders and holding the wet garment away from her body with her fingers, she continued, half-weeping: "Why? Why are you so unkind to me? What have I done that you should treat me this way? And now I am all wet! Look at me! Wet to the skin! . . ."

"You were not attending to your work!" charged Andreina, all the more positive and self-assured since she knew that she had been gratuitously unfair and in the wrong. "I have been calling for half an hour and here you lay sleeping."

"You didn't call!" returned the maid, still weeping, still wriggling uncomfortably in her wet garments. "If you had, I would have heard."

Andreina set the glass on the window-sill again.

"I am not a liar the way you are," she answered. "I called for at least half an hour—otherwise why should I have come in here? . . . Anyway, you just get busy and make breakfast for two! Serve it in the other room!"

"I am going to find another place!" whimpered the maid, trying to dry herself with a towel. "What kind of treatment is this? I won't work for you any more."

A torturing disgust was writhing deep down in Andreina's soul. "Why am I doing all this?" she again asked herself, dismayed at her own abasement. But again she was unable to control the desperate impulse within her to be mean and petty, to hurt. She seized the maid by an arm and spoke harshly, venomously, into her face:

"You can get out any time you please, but as long as you stay here you are going to behave!"

"Behave?" cried the maid, frightened, drawing back and trying to free her arm. "I haven't done anything!"

Andreina did not allow her to finish.

"You haven't done anything? How about Signor Davico? What did you do with Signor Davico? You brazen liar!"

She pressed the girl's arm with all the strength in her hand, sinking her long, sharp nails deep into the flabby muscles. Then she added with a certain secret and gallingly bitter satisfaction: "Signor Davico is going to live here from now on. From now on he will be master in this house. You are to obey him the way you have obeyed the Marchese Matteo. And remember this: If I catch you even looking at him, I'll give you a thrashing such as you never got from either of those two guttersnipes you thought you were going to marry!"

And leaving the astonished and terrified maid weeping and rubbing her bruised arm, Andreina went out of the room.

In the corridor her artificial severity suddenly vanished, and the comic aspects of the scene with Cecilia drew half a smile to her face. Going on into the vestibule she observed that there was a letter in the plate on which the post was left. She picked it up and went back into her bedroom.

Stefano lay outstretched in the same position in which she had left him. He was still asleep. She took off the dressing-gown, walked aimlessly about the room for a time, looking first at one thing then at another, then got into bed again, drawing the covers up over her. But as she sought a comfortable position one of her feet touched the cripple on the leg. He opened his eyes, looked about, and his gaze finally rested on Andreina.

"Good morning!" he murmured. "Ohee, ohee!" And he sat laboriously up, stretching. "What time is it getting to be, anyway?"

"Ten o'clock!" answered Andreina, without looking around.

Stefano frowned with an incommoded, perplexed air as he adjusted the pillows behind his back.

"I had a very bad night," he said, ill-humoured, almost angry. "And it was all your fault. You do nothing but squirm, kick—and talk . . ."

"I talked?" asked Andreina, also sitting up and toying dreamily with her letter, without making up her mind to open it. "What did I say?"

"I should say you talked!" answered Stefano, still bad-humoured, pressing his side with a hand. "You were at it all the time. It wouldn't have been so bad if you had just talked. You screamed. I don't remember just what you said. Something about jewels, then jewels again. And then a lot about a room. Finally you gave a yell: 'Kill her!' Whom you were talking to and whom you wanted to kill, Heaven only knows."

Andreina did not move, nor did she stop toying with the letter in her thoughtful, absent-minded sort of way. She looked at Stefano out of the corner of an eye, but he had turned towards the nightstand and was pouring himself a glass of water. He seemed to have forgotten what he had been saying and the imprudent cry that had escaped her during her sleep.

"There's another room in the house," she commented after a moment, still without moving, thoughtful. "I'll tell Cecilia to make the couch up for you. In that way, henceforward . . ." She lingered on the word deliciously. Knowing that she was now irremediably lost she liked to imagine that Stefano would never again depart from her house or from her life. "Henceforward you can sleep in peace and I for my part will run no risk of revealing any compromising secrets to you while I am asleep."

There was a dark and bold allusiveness in her words that in her intention should have aroused the invalid's curiosity. But Stefano never thought of anybody but himself and had no intuition of subtleties in other people. He missed completely the hint as to secrets that she might betray in her sleep and fastened instead on the implied assumption that he was to leave the Malacridas and come and live in her house.

Now he had never been less inclined than at that moment to establish a permanent tie with Andreina. His curiosity sated, and having also satisfied the point of vanity that made it seem necessary to possess himself of his former mistress again, he had suddenly become aware of the drawbacks in a relationship that would be now gloomy and depressing, now moderately gay, but in any case always unpleasant. He reflected that Andreina was a capricious, unbalanced person to begin with. Now that Matteo had dropped her, she could not count on a penny and sooner or later he would have her on his hands. Finally, though she undeniably had a certain youthful attractiveness, now that he had had her and could look at her more calmly and with a clearer eye, he decided that one could not even call her beautiful! "She's getting fat," he thought, studying her in irritation. "Give her a year or two more and she will be a wreck."

But there were other considerations weighing against any continuance of the intrigue he had just respliced. They did not concern Andreina directly but they were not less valid on that account. In view of the state of his health, he had long since concluded that what he needed was not a greedy, romantic, temperamental mistress such as Andreina was, but a nurse, an attendant, a housekeeper, who would look to his comforts and then render sentimental favours more or less incidentally and as a matter of obedience in line with the day's work. Talking with Cecilia at moments when Andreina was not present or evenings when Cecilia was helping him home, he had noted in the girl a good sense, an affection, and a devotion that had quite surprised him in a person of her station and had made more intolerable to him the gloomy caprices, the dramatic poses, the frigid calculation of Andreina. He had worked out a plan and communicated it to Cecilia. He had a small allowance from his sister. Not enough for an extravagant wastrel like Andreina, it would be more than sufficient for him and a person like Cecilia. They would find a cheap but comfortable apartment and go and live there. In that way, he figured, he would be ridding himself of Andreina and all the Malacridas at a single stroke and at the same time be assuring himself of a mistress, a housekeeper, and a nurse!

In fixing on that plan Stefano realized perfectly that he was renouncing all the ambitions with which he had left the sanatorium for town. "I set out to have my fill of duchesses and high life," he could not help confessing to himself, "and here I am settling down with a kitchen drudge!" But he knew himself and he knew the world. He knew that sick as he was, poor, alone, with Maria Luisa hostile and no one else to support him, he would never get very far in society in any case. In taking up with Cecilia, therefore, he was merely facing of his own free choice a reality that would eventually be thrust upon him perforce.

Cecilia had submitted to his first advances in the half-servile, half-enamoured fashion in which maids often yield to an employer, not daring to do otherwise. By now she seemed to have fallen wholly in love and naturally accepted his proposal eagerly. After much talk and endless preparations they had settled on a small apartment in one of the older quarters of the city. Cecilia had gone in greatest secrecy to buy furniture and other necessaries and make it ready. They had finally agreed that on a Sunday later in that month, after a call that Stefano would make at

Andreina's house, they would leave together and never show themselves there again.

He had made the call, according to plan, but then, lo and behold, after an attack of spasms and sobs and other fireworks, Andreina, like a sick horse unable to make up its mind to die, had finally consented to become his mistress again. Taken quite aback, Stefano had hesitated for a moment, but then he had concluded that the opportunity was too good to miss. He had found a hurried pretext to postpone his flight with Cecilia and the opening of the new apartment. He had even forgotten the very existence of the maid, applying himself in all concentration to the enjoyment of favours that had come as unexpectedly as eagerly longed for. But now he was sorry that he had not refused and, fearful that he might lose Cecilia once she learned of his affair with her mistress, he was thinking only of the simplest means of being rid of Andreina. Nothing, therefore, could have given him greater annoyance than Andreina's proposal that she have her sitting-room made ready for his occupancy.

"If I were in your place," he finally answered, "I would not bother to fix up that room."

"Why not?" asked Andreina, still toying with the unopened letter and in apparent indifference.

"So long as that maid doesn't come in here!" thought Stefano, with anxious glances at the door. But then he concluded, though with no great assurance, that Andreina might have some reluctance about showing herself to her maid lying in bed at his side.

"Why, for the very good reason," he replied quickly, with the cold, harsh violence that often rang in his voice, "that I have not the slightest intention of coming here to live."

Andreina frowned, tore open the envelope without saying a word, and took out the sheet of paper that it contained. It was a bill from her dressmaker for several hundred lire. She tossed it upon the nightstand, then turned resolutely in Stefano's direction, stretched out on her side, and rested her cheek on her hand in such a way as to have her eyes on the invalid's face.

"Listen," she began slowly, as though finding her words with difficulty. "I need your advice. Pietro keeps insisting that I should become his wife, but he thinks that until we are married I ought to look for work as a salesgirl or a stenographer and try to earn something. What do you say? Do you think I should do as he suggests?"

The question was a grim trap that she felt she was laying more to snare herself than Stefano. She wanted to get at the truth by an indirect route without betraying the resentment that the cripple's reply had aroused in her. Stefano did not perceive the trap, and even if he had, he would have taken no pains to avoid it.

"In your place I would not hesitate," he answered brutally. "It's also true that in Pietro's place I would never think of marrying you—tastes are tastes, to be sure. For that matter I don't see what else there is for you to do. I don't say that Pietro is any great catch, but he works and earns something, and in times like these . . ."

He did not complete his sentence. He yawned, closing his mouth with the flat of his hand, and then stretched in a lazy, sleepy fashion.

A thick lock of hair had fallen forward over Andreina's left eye. It was somewhat of a nuisance, but she was holding Stefano under a fixed, fascinated gaze and did not bother to brush it into place again.

"Don't you think," she resumed in a quiet, speculative tone, "that after what has taken place between you and me I am hardly in a position to accept Pietro's proposal, and that if I had ever intended to, I should hardly be here with you?"

The turn the conversation was taking, and those two eyes that refused to leave his face, were beginning to give Stefano an actually physical annoyance. He was inclined to think that Andreina had gone out of her wits and he was therefore interested in but one thing: to be free of her at the earliest possible moment.

"What could I have to say about a thing like that?" he answered, harshly. "It's nothing that concerns me in any way. Do whatever you please."

There was a moment's silence. Andreina felt disconcerted but did not like to show it.

"Well, it isn't true anyway," she finally lied. "Pietro has given up the idea of marrying me. . . . And do you know why I invented that little story I told you?"

"No, why?"

She answered in a slow, lazy voice:

"Just to see whether there was any basis for a suspicion I had—that after having got what you wanted from me, you were now thinking of dropping me."

"My, my!" cried Stefano, laughing—but actually he was not a little troubled on his side. "You are a sly one, aren't you! Well, what conclusion did you come to?"

"That the suspicion is well grounded," Andreina answered in the same careless, indifferent drawl. "That you are intending to drop me. Did I not guess your thought?"

The woman's monotone and her incomprehensible manner angered Stefano excessively. However eager he was to be free of her, he was not attracted to the idea that the initiative in the rupture should rest with her.

"You hit the nail on the head," he replied with the precise intention of hurting her feelings in their tenderest point of pride. "Yet I don't think it took any great amount of brains to reach that conclusion. I don't believe I ever made any secret of my intentions."

A formless suffering that was a blend of hatred and dismay writhed and twisted in the depths of Andreina's spirit. Unable either to express it or to drive it away, she sat there motionless, fascinated, and found herself unavoidably thrown back upon falsehood and a vindictive pettiness.

"Isn't it strange!" she answered, after a time, with a false air of surprise. "Before you woke up, I was lying here with the very same thought in my mind—that I should get rid of you at any cost and as soon as possible. A most curious coincidence!"

But Stefano was not slow in countering. He looked at the ceiling and gave his voice a tone of ironical amusement.

"Curious indeed! The most curious thing about it is that the first step you thought of taking in your effort to get rid of me was to ask me to come here and live with you!"

The thrust had been accurately calculated, and each word in it gave Andreina the precise amount of hurt that it had been designed to inflict. She bit her lips but answered quickly, trying to find as indifferent and conversational a tone as possible:

"But what makes you think that I suggested your coming here because I was in love with you? Don't flatter yourself! We women manage to conceal our aims rather cleverly. It may easily be that I made the suggestion for reasons in no way related to love. You see, I am hard pressed for money and I might have hoped that for the time being you could help me out. However, that is not inconsistent with my having thought of getting rid of you." She paused for a second, and then added, pensively: "I think I had better tell you why I thought of just that. The truth is, you are not the Stefano I knew ten years ago. What induced me to return to you last evening was the memory of all that you had been to me and of how, in spite of everything, you had succeeded in winning my love in those days. But it has all proved very disappointing. As I said—you are not the same! . . . At that time," she continued, in her indifferent, chatty, drawling tone, "you were a handsome youth, thin, strong, lively, full of freshness and charm, with an intelligent, open, even ingenuous face. I found you attractive from every point of view. Well, what are you like now?" She paused, and seemed to meditate for a second. "Now you are fat, helpless, lame, diseased, down at the heels, unable to talk of anything but your ailments and your affairs with women. You have grown old, ugly, vulgar, and stupid—you are, in a word, fit at the most for a rag of a wench—someone like Cecilia, let us say." She shook her head sadly. "I'm sorry, Stefano. I would not have been as frank had I not seen you going to such extremes in your illusions about yourself."

Stefano had listened to these painful and insulting truths with a grave, frowning face. When she ended, he forced a laugh, but it was plain that her words had hurt him deeply.

"Now you needn't be so sorry," he retorted. "You needn't feel sorry in the least. There's no reason for being. What surprises me is that you did not notice the change in me at once, and that, instead of sending me away at the very first, you tried to get me for almost a month——"

"I never tried to get you," interrupted Andreina. She had lowered her head.

". . . tried to get me for almost a month," he repeated, ignoring the interruption. "And you waited till this morning to discover that I am not what I was ten years ago. But never mind that. What I would like to have you know is that I too hoped to find the Andreina of ten years ago and that I too have been disappointed, profoundly disappointed, to see that you have changed so much."

"Yes," she said, without looking up. "At that time I was naïve—so naïve that I believed in you. Now, thank Heaven, I have been cured of all that."

"That's not it, that's not the point at all!" cried Stefano in a false, triumphant voice, shaking his head. "At fourteen you knew everything that you know now. You were just as shameless, just as vicious, just as much of a liar, as you are now. The change lies in another direction. At that time—one has to admit it—you were silent, discreet, self-contained. Now you are whimpering all the time. You have turned melodramatic. You are always making grand, theatrical gestures, always reciting a part. Before very long that tires a fellow out, till one would give almost anything for a woman without complications—there are plenty of them, you know, and they are the best. . . . As you see," he concluded, in a shrill, unfeeling tone, "my reasons are as sound as yours are. But there is one difference. You say you have been disappointed. That means that you must have had illusions. Now I have never had any illusions about you, either now or ten years ago. For you I have never had but one feeling."

"What would it be?" asked Andreina, sitting there motionless and, as it were, petrified.

Though he had been making every effort to conceal his true reactions, Stefano had been terribly hurt by the woman's judgments of him. He therefore sought an answer that would vent his raging, overpowering eagerness to hurt.

"Contempt!" he said.

There was silence for a time. Then Andreina recovered her chatty tone.

"If you despise me so much, why did you come and look me up?" she asked, and in asking the question she incautiously opened the way for one of his offensive rejoinders. He quickly took advantage of her slip:

"Because I could find nothing better—that's why!"

Hatred was working in Andreina like one of those slow poisons that gradually paralyse the limbs. Inwardly cramped, stultified, she would have found greatest relief in making or inspiring some gesture of tenderness, in dissolving in tears the stiffness that was creeping over her spirit, in begging for mercy. But a wretched, uncontrollable force was pulling her in the opposite direction.

"That may well be," she said slowly, showing her inner strain. "But after these ten years you are sick and a cripple. I have gained in good looks what I may have lost in other ways. After all, good looks may be a better asset than virtuous qualities."

She paused and waited for the answer with an angry but engrossing anxiety. "My beauty is something he cannot deny!" she thought to herself. "That, at least, is beyond question." She was disagreeably surprised, therefore, when she heard Stefano begin to clear his throat with a series of doubting "ahems."

"Good looks!" he finally returned. "Perhaps! But one could never call you beautiful! You are twenty-five—that's true, and youth counts for something. But beautiful you have never been and never will be. I was thinking of that last night when we came in here. Your chest is too long, too low set, and too heavy. You are too bulging in the hips, your legs are too thick, your ankles too full, you have ugly knees. Furthermore, you are gaining in weight, and since you are too indolent to take any exercise you will probably grow worse in that respect. In a word, if you are this way at twenty-five, why, at thirty——"

He was not allowed to finish. Andreina had turned over and had been listening with her weight resting on her elbows and her breast flattened on the mattress. She suddenly shook her head with a strange violence.

"Stop!" she cried, and there was a wild, quivering hoarseness in her voice. "Stop! Stop!"

She had lowered her head. Her eyes were gazing straight into the pillow under it. In that strange posture she looked as though she had started to dash her head into the back of the bed, and then checked herself. "Stop!" she cried once more, but with a breaking voice in which anger showed a faltering of tears.

A long silence followed. Stefano stretched out on the bed again. He took a cigarette from the nightstand, lighted it, and lay there smoking pensively, looking at the ceiling. Andreina, holding the same strange posture, finally let her forehead down till it rested on the pillow. She seemed little by little to recover her calm. Then she turned over again and sat up, brushed her hair back from her face, and adjusted the shoulder strap of her low-cut nightrobe, which had slipped down.

"Where on earth is that maid with the coffee!" she suddenly cried, irritated, impatient. And she reached for the bell-rope.

In spite of his apparent abstraction, Stefano had been watching her every move, and when he saw that she really intended to ring for the maid, he sat upright on the bed with a violent start.

"Never mind about breakfast," he said, hurriedly. "I'm not going to take any. Besides, I've got to be going." And he threw the bedclothes aside as though preparing to get up.

Andreina gave a faint snicker.

"Where do you come in?" she exclaimed. "I want breakfast for myself."

Stefano was at his wit's end.

"Well, now—I say—you're not going to bring Cecilia in here with me in bed beside you?"

"Why not? Afraid?"

And she punctuated the question with a gaze that was at once so piercing and so sarcastic that Stefano decided to make no answer. "Well, let's make the best of it!" he thought to himself, resignedly, and he drew the covers back over him again. Andreina tugged at the bell.

Almost immediately there came a knock at the door and the maid entered, carrying the breakfast tray.

"Oh, Cecilia!" cried Stefano, with a false gaiety, deciding that good-humoured unconsciousness was his best course. "How have you been, Cecilia? I haven't seen you for some time."

The maid replied curtly, very much on her dignity:

"I have been very well, sir."

She stepped forward to the bed, and with an ostentatious fussiness that was intended to call attention to her diligence, she arranged the tray in the space between Andreina and her companion.

"All these delicious things to eat!" cried Stefano again, with a forced display of pleasure that he hoped would hide his discomfiture. "So good of you, Cecilia! Thank you!"

To that Cecilia made no answer at all. She merely looked at Andreina and remarked, simply:

"The Marchese Matteo is waiting in the other room."

"The Marchese Matteo!" cried Andreina, startled. And she looked at the girl.

"Yes," Cecilia answered. And then after a moment: "Is there anything else?"

For a moment Andreina sat looking into space in front of her.

"Tell him I am not at home," she finally ordered. But she corrected herself at once: "No—wait! I'll go and talk to him myself."

And she leapt out of bed, put on her dressing-gown, and hurried into the bathroom.

Leaning on one elbow, Stefano seemed to be intent on pouring his cup of coffee, but he had lost not one jot of Andreina's movements. On seeing her disappear through the bathroom door, he brought himself up with a jerk, reached out from the bed, and seized Cecilia's arm in a firm grip as she, uncertain of herself but on her dignity, was turning towards the door to leave the room.

"So we are agreed, eh? Today we go!" he panted, and he drew her towards him, trying to force her to sit down on the bed.

Cecilia's fear of losing Stefano was much more potent than any jealousy at his blatant infidelity that she may have felt. None the less she judged that she ought to make some show of being offended.

"Let go of me!" she commanded, backing against Stefano, with her eyes on the bathroom door and digging her pink, puffy fingers under the cripple's hand in an effort to loosen his clutch on her arm. "Let go of me! If you don't, I'll call the countess."

"If you're jealous of that creature, you're wrong," he said, with a cold vehemence, still holding her with one hand and with the other picking up a piece of toast, buttered and covered with marmalade, from a dish on the tray. "She is half crazy and not even pretty. You are worth a hundred times more than she is. You should attach no importance to the fact of finding me here. It has no importance. Now to show me that you believe that, and are not going to sulk, you must eat the other half of this piece of toast that I have buttered and jellied just for you. So then, your mouth open. . . ."

He lifted his hand and brought the piece of toast to the maid's painted lips. His cold, harshly commanding tone had its effect on the simple Cecilia, so good-natured to begin with. The offer of the toast, moreover, was a novel refinement of courtship that she could not resist.

"But you're crazy!" she protested in a whisper, struggling just enough not to free herself from his grasp, and with apprehensive eyes fixed on the bathroom door. Then she suddenly ceased struggling, pressed more closely against him, and with a movement of her body rubbed his shoulder with her side. "Why should I eat your toast?" she asked, not knowing what to say. "I have had my breakfast."

"Well, have a second breakfast!" said Stefano, quickly. "So then, that mouth open!" And he again brought the piece of bread to the maid's low-bent, obstinate, hesitating face.

Cecilia was torn between an absolute terror lest Andreina should reappear through the door and an eagerness somehow to show that she had forgiven Stefano and was not less fond of him than she had been the day before. But she could only yield. She turned quickly around and brushed her hand in an awkward caress over his cheek.

"Very well!" she whispered. "But then you'll let go of me, won't you?"

She bent forward with a playful but cautious movement, drew her lips up over her teeth in order not to soil them with the marmalade, and then, holding off Stefano's imperious wrist with a hand, opened her mouth and took a generous bite at the toast.

"That's the talk!" said the invalid, putting the rest of the piece into his own mouth. And to demonstrate his satisfaction more tangibly, he brought his right arm around and the hand at the end of it delivered a solid slap on Cecilia's inviting flank.

At that moment the bathroom door reopened and Andreina entered the room. She was too preoccupied and too much in a hurry to catch the lightning-like movement with which Stefano turned towards the tray again; nor did she notice that Cecilia lowered her head to hide an over-full mouth as she darted out through the bedroom door.

In the bathroom Andreina had powdered her face and fixed her hair.

"What do you think he wants?" she asked.

Without waiting for a reply, she stepped over to the mirror to look at herself, tightening the girdle of her dressing-gown as she walked.

"He has probably come to tell you that he has made up with his wife," answered Stefano, again trying to hurt.

But Andreina merely shrugged her shoulders. She picked up a cigarette, lighted it, and left the room.

II

MATTEO was waiting for his sometime mistress in the little parlour, sitting stiffly erect on the edge of the sofa, with his overcoat on and his gloves and his cane in one hand.

He had decided on the visit with the greatest reluctance after revolving over and over again and from all points of view the new and painful thoughts that the discovery of Andreina's duplicity and her many infidelities had awakened in him. Boundless had been his astonishment and disappointment on learning, first from Sofia and then from a last talk by telephone with Andreina herself, how, over a period of two years that had raced by in raptures of his passion for the girl, she had continually fooled and cheated him. Often in the past he had reproached himself—not without a touch of complacent vanity—for having led the girl astray, weaned her away from home and a respectable married life, and made a career of useful work impossible for her. What a shock to discover that, quite to the contrary, she was already expert from long practice in the grim profession to which he thought he had introduced her! What a depth of cold and selfish calculation underlay all those charming playful ways, all those innocent tomfooleries, all those winsome bursts of girlish ingenuousness! And—the hardest thrust of all to bear—the last to enjoy the favours of that seemingly pure and much abused creature had been Pietro Monatti, his friend and his sister's fiancé!

All that had profoundly shaken Matteo's spirit, breaking upon his dreams and feelings much as a storm of wind and hail might break upon a field of ripened grain all but ready for the mowing. For three weeks, in a mood of mingled incomprehension and stupor, he had not once ceased to think of his misfortune, losing his sleep and his appetite over it. But his was the temperament of a middle-aged man all too familiar with disillusionments, and he had no great vigour of intellect to fall back upon, no breadth of view. He had not flown out into a rage, therefore, nor had he any thought of hatred or vengeance. He had simply slumped down into a disheartened, half-frightened despondency. He was finished! He no longer counted! Stretching away before him he could see a lonely, tedious old age—bridge at the club, walks in the park, cigarettes, dressing three times a day, cross-word puzzles in the privacy of his room! Without Andreina, who had filled him too full of herself, his life would be entirely empty and meaningless, and in the face of such a dreary prospect, furthermore, his dependence on his stingy scold of a wife seemed to him all but intolerable.

But that same sense of emptiness that led him to pass whole days in succession in a sort of anguished reverie at last prompted him to consider the possibility of resuming his relations with Andreina. And, following a sentimental and largely unconscious process of his own mind, and an inclination that comes to everybody to be convinced of the pleasanter thing, his first step in that direction had been to doubt that Andreina had really been as unfaithful and deceitful as she seemed to have been. Or rather, since her infidelities and her deceitful tricks could not be denied, he began to wonder whether, after all, they had the importance that he had at first attached to them. She had lied to him, he admitted, but that was understandable, once she felt obliged to establish consistencies with other lies that she had told but not to damage him. She had deceived him in the matter of Pietro! But that may have been just a momentary flare! Who was not guilty of such things? Lies, infidelities? Yes—but they did not prove that she had not really loved him and did not, after her fashion, love him still. As he compared himself with Pietro, he could see only reasons for hoping anew. "Her affair with Pietro cannot last," he assured himself. "Pietro is a restless, nervous, disorderly sort of person, and Andreina has all those traits, and worse ones, on her side. What she needs is a sober, settled man, someone like me, someone older than she is who will manage or advise her."

In the light of these considerations, and others just as convincing and just as well founded, Matteo had finally resolved to visit the woman, and there he was sitting in her parlour, stiffly erect on the edge of the sofa, uneasy, constrained, and doing his best to keep his eyes from looking too closely at the condition of the room about him. For what he could see there, to tell the truth, was not altogether reassuring; in fact it tended to belie the far-fetched hopes that had brought him thither, in a most positive and brutal fashion. Cecilia's daily offensive against untidiness had not as yet extended to Andreina's little sitting-room. There everything remained much as she and Stefano had left it when, after Pietro's departure, they had found themselves alone in the house. The rumpled, disordered pillows on the couch in the alcove talked, as it were, aloud. The floor lamp still lay overturned on the floor in the same spot upon which it had fallen in the course of some scuffle or other. Side by side in the ashtray on the stand lay two cigarettes that had been allowed to go out immediately after they were lighted. On the same stand were two glasses of cordial, filled to the brim but untouched. The fact that the bottle also stood there with the stopple drawn and lying beside it helped only too clearly to explain the overturned lamp and the disarrayed divan. "Here," everything seemed to say, "two persons were seated. They suddenly left off drinking and smoking and engaged in an amorous wrestle that eventually upset the lamp so that they were finally left in the dark." Matteo, however, refused to draw the obvious conclusion from his observations. He refused to pass any judgment till he had had his talk with Andreina. That being the case, he was further obliged to refuse to look about him, and so he ended by sitting there with his eyes glued obstinately upon the curtained doorway.

When God willed, the curtain was drawn aside and Andreina made one of her usual theatrical entrances, holding up the hem of her black, close-fitting dressing-gown in one hand and applying a lighted cigarette to her lips with the other.

"So glad to see you! How have you been?" she began, with an overdone matter-of-factness, coughing, and playfully wriggling two lines of naked toes that peered from under the edge of her dressing-gown. "But you are original, I must say—calling on people at such an hour! This room has not been set in order yet. It still smells of the smoking last night. I am ashamed to have you find things this way—but you will understand and not mind."

That had all been said with a feigned conversational dignity; but then, after a few steps here and there about the room, Andreina gave a kick, with the tip of a sandal, at an empty cigarette package that was lying in the middle of the floor, sending it flying under the divan. Then she walked back toward the door and sat down on a hassock.

"You will understand and not mind," she repeated, throwing one leg over the other and bending forward to look at her still wriggling toes. "And how is everybody over at your place?"

"That's not a promising frame of mind," thought Matteo, but meanwhile the mere sight of her had filled him with a trembling emotion that all but took his breath away. Knowing how strange a creature she was, he was not disheartened by her cold, grand manner and thought he still had reason to be hopeful.

"Oh, they're all right!" he answered, as though the inquiry had been made in good faith. He laid his hat, gloves, and cane carefully on the couch, and then added, with almost fatherly concern, bending forward towards her: "But you look pale and tired this morning. I don't think you ought to smoke so early in the day."

"Never mind me!" she returned, with a wave of her hand. She still kept to her best social manner, though there was a vaguely sarcastic ring in her tone of voice now. "Tell me—I meant, how are things going with your wife? You have her back with you?"

After all that had happened, Matteo could not possibly believe that such a question on Andreina's part could be disinterested. Confirming the new and saddening conception he now had of her, it therefore failed to surprise him. "She wants to be clear on that point," he reflected, "because she's afraid I may not have enough of an allowance to keep her the way I used to." And he further noted that such a cold and rawly dispassionate supposition would never have occurred to him a month before, when he was still under the false impression that Andreina had an altogether unselfish love for him. This new atmosphere pained him deeply. He sighed heavily and dropped his eyes to the floor.

"No, we haven't exactly made up," he answered, "but we shall, probably, before long. She has promised to go with me and Sofia to a party this evening."

"Oh, she has gone as far as that!" interrupted Andreina, with a strange eagerness.

"Yes," answered Matteo, speaking slowly and prey to a worried feeling he could not account for. "So I imagine that tonight, or if not just tonight, tomorrow or the next day, we shall be finding her definitely resettled in our house. And that will be the end of that whole unpleasant business."

He paused, gave another sigh, again dropped his eyes to the floor, then finally looked up, moulding his wasted middle-aged face into an expression of tenderness and affection. "But, Andreina, why talk of things like that? Why don't we . . . ?"

But she broke his proposal off. Leaning forward and exhaling smoke from her cigarette through her nostrils, she asked:

"What present are you going to give her? For surely you are going to make your wife a present on such an occasion?"

Matteo thought he could credit that question to the capricious temper of the girl. He therefore smothered the annoyance it would otherwise have caused him. He adopted a tone of sad, indulgent considerateness that was admirably in keeping with his bald head, his low forehead, his wrinkled, weary face.

"But why talk about such things, Andreina? Let's talk about you!"

"No," returned Andreina, positive, aggressive, shaking her head, and half grunting the negative. "No, we're going to talk about your wife." She became earnest. "Since you are having a reconciliation with her, you ought to realize how a gentleman should behave in such circumstances. Now let's see: First of all, the two of you take a trip to some pretty place—Sicily, let's say, or the French Riviera. On the train you are very attentive—you shut the window if the smoke blows in, you buy her flowers, newspapers, sweets, you tell her the names of the stations. In a word, a second wedding journey! But that's just the obvious thing. In addition you make her a big, a very big present, a diamond necklace, for instance. . . . By the way, what about those jewels your wife lost? Did they ever find the thief, or get them back?"

Matteo listened to this chatty, sarcastic talk with a face that expressed a sad and compassionate patience.

"No," he finally answered, as though uncertain whether to interrupt or to allow Andreina to get the whole burden of such irrelevant nonsense off her mind. "Nobody was ever arrested, nothing ever returned."

He saw her eyes glitter with a false light. She raised a naked arm and clicked the end of her middle finger off the end of her thumb.

"My, but that's an idea!" she cried. "There's the present you ought to make her! The diamond necklace that was stolen! It will come high, of course! But think of the impression it will make! . . . Yes, obviously—the diamond necklace! But how will you manage? Where will you get the money? . . . Dear me—what an idiot I am! I was forgetting that your wife is keeping you the way you used to keep me! So—how will you manage, Matteo?" She pretended to meditate for a moment, rubbing her forehead with a hand. But then a mock light dawned. "I have it! You get the money from Maria Luisa on some pretext or other! You let a few days go by, then you buy back the necklace with the money! What difference does it make where the money comes from? What counts is the intention, the sentiment, don't you think?"

She paused and looked at him in exaggeratedly questioning earnestness.

There was a moment's silence. When Matteo spoke, he managed to retain his kindly tone.

"I imagine that that must have reached bottom for you in the matter of sarcasm. Suppose now we turn to ourselves, in other words to the reasons that have brought me here this morning."

Andreina made a brusque gesture.

"Don't worry, we'll come to that in due course. We have all the time there is. For the present—how is your sister Sofia?"

"Why, she's all right!" answered Matteo, surprised, nevertheless, at the question.

"Still pining for Monatti?"

Matteo's face darkened, but he decided to take the query in good part.

"I don't know anything about that."

And he lowered his head.

Andreina's cigarette had burned short. She tossed it with a vigorous throw at the window. It did not quite reach, and fell upon the floor under the window-sill. She spoke in the same chatty tone again:

"Well, she ought not to take it too hard. Monatti is suffering from an attack of heroism—or it may be just conceit, for under all his prattle about doing unto others there is always the point of pride. In the end he will find his balance again and go back to her. Then they will marry. You, after all, cannot raise any objection, being as they say the fifth wheel on the cart—you count, that is, for less than nothing. And there will be a first-class wedding—pictures in the Sunday papers, and all that, attendants that will make every last housemaid gasp! For the bride—at the very least a prince! For the groom, some big name from the newspaper world, or from politics! And you in your tall hat, with that frump of a wife on your arm! . . . Dear me! I can just see it all! . . ."

And Andreina laughed boisterously, throwing herself back on the hassock and covering her face with a hand.

Deep down in Matteo a feeling of repentance for having ventured on this visit was beginning to dawn. An inborn and very convenient sense of resigned hopelessness, on the one hand, and on the other a deep-seated conviction that Andreina was a strange person anyway, and therefore was not to be taken too seriously, applied, as it were, a stanching bandage to his sensitiveness that had never bled very freely in the best case. All the same, the sarcastic undertone, and especially the high shrill pitch of the woman's voice, were such that he could not help feeling an incipient sense of discomfort.

"Andreina," he protested finally. "Enough of that sort of thing! Try to listen to me, just for a moment——"

Again she broke him off, feigning surprise:

"Why, by all means! Here we are chatting, talking about this and that—and we haven't even reached the weather yet—and meantime I haven't the remotest idea of why you have come here! Bless us! . . . But do you want to bet that I can guess the reason why you have come here, without your telling me? Let's try! You came here to ask me to go back to the *status quo ante,* didn't you!"

Matteo wore the apprehensive face of a person who might be seeing a monkey or a child playing with an antique vase of great value but dares not try to get it away for fear it may be dropped and broken into a thousand pieces.

"It depends on what you mean by the *status quo ante!"* he answered at last.

"Why, I mean—go back and be your mistress again! That was your idea, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Matteo confessed, though he was far from liking her frank language or the tone in which she spoke. "Yes, that was it. But I should have preferred a different word, a word that would express a real friendship, a real affection. You know very well, Andreina, that I have never thought of you as anything but a comrade, a companion. . . . I have had too high a regard for your intelligence, your character, your cultivation of mind, to think of you as . . . as merely——"

In interrupting him this time, Andreina did not stop at a wave of her hand. She leapt to her feet.

"Will you have done with such clap-trap!" she shouted, starting to pace the floor. "Do you think that I don't know what I am about and that therefore I have to be smeared with soothing syrup? You want me to go back to the old situation with you. . . . Well, that's a fair proposition, as well worth considering as any other. Only—I'm afraid you have come too late!"

"Too late? What do you mean?"

Andreina reached down, picked up the fallen lamp, and set it on its legs again. Her chatty manner now took on a slovenly, darkly allusive colouring.

"What I mean is that you have come too late to take me back to what I was, and too soon to realize what I am."

"I don't understand you," said Matteo, sincerely pained, his face showing a puzzled foreboding. "I don't understand just what you mean."

"Well, you will!" answered Andreina. "Just you wait here a moment."

She strode across the room and out through the door.

She could not herself have told just why she left the room in that manner, unless it were to think up some insulting means of bringing Matteo's annoying visit to an end. Just what means she could not have guessed. But the window in the reception-room was open, and the rug had been drawn up around the legs of the table. And there was Cecilia, in a striped apron, with her sleeves rolled up to her elbows and the cosmetics on her face streaked with perspiration. She was using a broom to push a dampened cloth back and forth over the tiles on the floor. Andreina's eyes rested on the broom, and then moved along to a pail of dirty water in which the maid had been rinsing and wetting her cloth.

"When do you think you'll be getting to the sitting-room?" she asked, in a scolding voice.

Cecilia had been pushing the cloth around with no great amount of enthusiasm. She looked up, surprised.

"But the marchese is in there . . . and until he goes . . . !"

"All the more reason! All the more reason!" stormed Andreina. "Your business is to follow orders. If I tell you to mop between his legs, between his legs you mop! So now . . . take that broom—and that pail—and come with me! . . ."

The woman obeyed in silence. She gathered up her cleaning things and followed her mistress into the sitting-room.

"I hope you'll excuse us," said Andreina to Matteo. "Unfortunately it's getting late and the house-cleaning has to be done. You can just talk on. Cecilia is one of the family, and you won't mind her. As for you, Cecilia," she continued, addressing the maid, "just take up the rug and mop the floor. The marchese won't mind."

Matteo was just beginning to see the drift of all this. He sat where he was, looking at the two women in mute stupefaction. So that unbalanced, sarcastic, grimly ingenious fury was the Andreina in whom he had taken a fatherly interest and who he thought had loved him! The spectacle hurt him as an unbearable but perfectly vivid nightmare. His despondency was now permeated with the astonished fright of one who might be seeing a hitherto consistent and harmonious reality dissolving to reveal, like the witch Alcina, a horrible, petrifying face.

"Well," he said, in his tone of sad, resigned acceptance, "you might postpone your house-cleaning for a moment or two—though I suppose I can stand it. Anyhow it means that you will probably be giving me your answer to my proposal." He lifted a pair of dull, glossy, deep-sunken eyes upon his sometime mistress. "Will you listen to me, or will you not?"

"Oh, I'm listening—I'm listening," answered Andreina.

She had helped the maid roll up the rug and was now busy pointing out to her the spots on the floor that required particular attention. "So I am to tell you whether I accept, or do not accept, your proposal—I see. Very well, let's have the proposal—I'm listening. Now what a mess that is there!" she continued, addressing Cecilia, pointing to the floor between Matteo's feet, and pushing the maid by the arm in that direction. "Go to it! Don't you see how dirty it is?"

Forgetful of her tortured worries of a few moments before, the maid did her best to bite away a smile. She splashed her cloth around a number of times in the pail, wrung it out, and finally threw it to the floor, driving it with a hard push from her broom between the feet of the former master of the house.

Busily thinking of just how he would formulate his proposal in the presence of a third party, Matteo had not been expecting the maid's attack. He gave a surprised start, arresting the advancing broom with the sole of his shoe.

"Why, Cecilia!" he cried. "What is getting into you? Have you gone crazy too? Don't you see that I am here?"

"Don't mind him, Cecilia!" cried Andreina, cold, resolved, frowning. "There's nothing but dirt in sight there! Mop it up—there—and there—and there!" And at every "there" there was a rush of the heavy wet rag toward those two well-shod feet, and a corresponding movement on their part to avoid it.

And yet, amid all that dodging and parrying, Matteo kept his sorrowful, bewildered gaze on Andreina, while his hand groped about on the couch behind him trying to reach his hat, cane, and gloves.

"I suppose I ought to be going," he said, rising, and there was a visible tremor about his pale, ill-shaped, withered lips.

But Andreina seemed not to hear.

"You are not using enough water, Cecilia," she cried. "That's why this filth refuses to go away! Wait—I'll give you a little more! . . ."

She picked up the pail in her two hands and dashed its full contents in Matteo's direction. The foul flood spread over the tiling on the floor, reached Matteo's feet, and went on beyond.

His shoes, socks, and trouser legs were drenched with splashes of dirty water.

Andreina set down the empty pail, leapt blithely over the puddle she had made, and stopped at the door.

"This is the way out," she pointed, calmly, drawing the curtain aside. "This way, please!"

After a moment of hesitant humiliation, Matteo strode over the puddle in his turn and reached the door. A blush that had a strangely senile look had tinged his forehead and the tops of his cheekbones. His dull, wavering eyes were winking rapidly under his protruding brows. His quivering lips seemed more straggling than usual. For a second, on the threshold, he seemed about to speak. But he shook his head instead, moved along past Andreina in silence, and reached the vestibule. There, holding his head down, he worked with hurried, mechanical movements at the chain, finally freed it, and opened the door. Andreina saw him step forward into the outer hallway, draw back his shoulders, and clap his hat upon his head with a stiff hand, while the other reached for the knob.

The door closed behind him.

III

SLOWLY, softly, with a dark, empty, menacing calm that was frightening even to herself, Andreina went back to her bedroom. Stefano was lying flat on his back reading a newspaper, but on catching sight of her again he laid the paper aside and sat up.

"Well?" he asked. "What did he want?"

Andreina shut the door, went to the bureau on which Stefano had set the breakfast tray, and filled a cup from the lukewarm coffee that was left in the pot. In the mirror she could see Stefano's reflection, as he sat on the bed, far away, his face bright from the glow of the lamp. She studied the image for a time.

"He wanted to begin over again where we left off," she finally answered, without turning around.

"Well," asked Stefano, with an indifference not altogether free of hope, "what did you say?"

"What did I say?" answered Andreina. She was sipping at her cup of cold unsweetened coffee. Between swallows she would stop and gaze with appraising eyes at the image in the mirror. "I was tempted to accept, because I'm really hard pressed for money. However—I refused."

A trace of disappointment flitted across Stefano's reflected face.

"That was probably a mistake," he commented, coldly. "You may be sorry later on."

Andreina set her cup down and seemed to meditate for a moment. Then calm, grave, she remarked:

"I gathered from something he said that you are about to become very rich."

The cripple was startled and looked at her.

"I rich? You must be getting your men mixed."

"No, you're the person!" retorted Andreina, turning sharply around. "It seems that you are sole heir of Maria Luisa's property. Well, Maria Luisa is going to die."

"Maria Luisa! Going to die!" Stefano repeated, with an astonishment that was none the less permeated with rapid calculation. He stared at Andreina, hitching himself about meanwhile into a more comfortable posture. "What are you talking about? Why—only the other day Valentina saw her on the street!"

"And yet, her condition is hopeless!" said Andreina, without moving, in a tone that was meant to suggest an inevitable fatality. "She is done for! It appears that she won't see midnight tonight!"

Stefano's pale fat face was overspread with a perplexed thoughtfulness.

"What are you talking about!?" he repeated. "Why? What's the matter with her?"

Andreina shook her head.

"That I don't know. I only know that she's going to die."

Stefano's impatience turned to irritation.

"Matteo didn't tell you what the matter was? That is hard to believe."

"No, he didn't tell me anything," said Andreina, darkly. She paused for a time, then she resumed, carelessly: "Tell me about your sister—you are sorry that she is going to die?"

In spite of the girl's insistence, Stefano had another attack of incredulousness.

"But you mean to say it's true!"

"Purest truth!" answered Andreina, with a disgusted air, as though she were referring to the passing of a noxious animal. "Nothing could be truer."

A considerable silence followed. The news had caught Stefano off his guard. His normal powers of pretence seemed to have deserted him along with his disciplined coolness. He sat motionless on the bed, with his head lowered, but his face bore the expression less of a man who has been struck with sorrow than of one who is doing his best to master an overpowering delight. In fact, the more he tried to wrinkle his brow and nod his head into a decent suggestion of distress, the more evidently a faint smile of greed twisted at his lips and climbed his cheeks.

"Of course, I'm sorry," he said finally, in a shrinking, perplexed voice. "Things have not been very pleasant between us, these last years. All the same, she is my sister."

He punctuated the remark with a despondent nodding of his head, but then he looked up and his eyes met Andreina's. That was enough suddenly to drive every trace of shock from the man's face. He beamed with a flush of joy that burned its way up from his neck and throat to the top of his cheeks.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he finally asked.

"What's wrong with the way I look?" she returned.

Flushed, joyous, Stefano could not contain his good humour.

"Oh, I know what's wrong with it," he replied, chaffing. "I know what's wrong! I'll bet that if I chose to I could tell you what you are thinking down to the very words."

"I'm not thinking anything in particular," said Andreina.

Unable any longer to pretend himself, Stefano bubbled over into a frank gaiety.

"You are a sly bitch!" he cried, excited, joyous, almost frantic. "Don't you know that there is decency in this world, that there are times when one has to pretend to feel even if one doesn't? But one can hide nothing from you. If it's swill, you smell it! . . . Come here, you rat!"

Andreina obeyed. Mute, grave, she stepped over to the bedside and sat down near him. Still flushed, still smiling, ready almost to weep, but of joy, not of grief, Stefano hitched vigorously along for an inch or two and clapped a hand to the back of her neck.

"A sly bitch—that's what you are!" And almost uproarious he gathered the loose skin of her neck into his nervous, caressing, protective fingers and shook her head playfully. "Tell me the truth! You are thinking that I don't care a fig about my sister's dying, that, in fact, I am pleased. The truth now—devil that you are!"

Frigidly, hatefully, Andreina surveyed the fat happy face in front of her with a steady gaze. Under the glow of the still lighted night lamp it seemed to have an almost senile lustre. Then she looked away and moved her eyes slowly about the close, dark room.

"You are mistaken," she answered, curtly. "I was thinking something quite different."

Stefano was gradually recovering from his pleasant shock. He removed his hand from the back of the girl's neck, picked up a cigarette, lighted it, and then slipped down on the bed till he lay on his back, with his head resting on a bent elbow.

"What was it then?" he asked.

"I was thinking how convenient it is for me that you should be coming into money. I was thinking that I have lost any inclination I may have had to be rid of you. . . . If you wish," she added, carelessly, "I am even ready to tell you that you are handsome, that your health could not be better, that you have the brain of a wizard, that you are better in every respect than you were ten years ago."

Stefano pretended not to understand. Blowing a puff of smoke far out into the air he commented:

"Sorry I can't use flattery in such profusion! What do you mean by all that?"

"I mean that from now on we shall always live together."

It was evident that Stefano was manœuvring to find out whether Andreina was in earnest or merely joking—what, in a word, her actual intentions were. He informed her, bluntly:

"But I have no desire whatever to stay with you. As I have already had occasion to remark—I have had enough of you!"

Andreina did not flinch. Coolly she answered:

"But—don't you see?—I haven't had enough of you! But don't worry! Before I am through with you, you will be quite satisfied to give me at least half of your fortune."

What she had said, but even more, the calm assurance with which she had said it, filled Stefano with a great alarm. Irrational as it may have been, a fear laid hold on him—and he could not control it—a fear that she really might have some secret means of depriving him of his future inheritance.

"Now joking is all right as far as it goes," he said, suddenly sitting up on the bed and looking darkly at the woman, earnest, determined. "But I have had enough for the present, Andreina. You have given me more than my fill this morning. There is a limit to everything. Now you are going just a little too far."

He saw her sketch a wan smile.

"So you think I am joking!" she said. "Really, I have never been more in earnest in my life. You ought to be praying to the God you believe in to keep me satisfied with half your fortune instead of taking everything, as I might easily do!"

Stefano looked at her steadily from under his eyebrows.

"Andreina, you have gone mad—stark mad!" He spoke in a low tone of disgusted commiseration. "Now one can't talk seriously with lunatics. I may just as well inform you, therefore, and point blank, that you are not going to get one penny of my fortune. Not one penny! . . . I hope you heard me!"

Again she sketched the same pallid, ghastly smile.

"I heard you. I answer that I am not a lunatic, and that you are going to give me the share that belongs to me. If you don't, there'll be trouble."

"Trouble be damned!" retorted Stefano with a contemptuous snicker. "And then tell me you are not mad! My poor Andreina—you are as mad as a hatter! Do you hear?"

She tossed her head.

"I'll make trouble," she explained calmly. "I'll tell of your great doings with me ten years ago. I'll spread the story everywhere, and the first person to hear of it will be your wife."

Stefano guffawed pityingly.

"But I haven't any wife!"

"Oh, but you will have!" Andreina assumed her chatty tone. "When one comes into money the first thing one thinks of is a wife and a home—children. A social status, in a word! Well, if you don't give me my half, I'll go to your wife and tell everything."

A danger so remote cured Stefano of his uneasiness as if by magic.

"I see—a case of plain, ordinary blackmail!" He slid down upon his back again. "Well—tell the story! Nobody will believe you."

A silence followed. Andreina yawned drearily and finally looked at Stefano with a sarcastic smile.

"I don't need your money! I would never ask you for a penny. I did want to put you to the test. But you—confess now!—you were sick with fright lest I might have found some way of separating you from all that money. Let's have the truth!"

With his nervousness gone Stefano re-entered into possession of his aptitudes for petty sparring.

"Wouldn't it be more accurate," he asked, removing his cigarette from his mouth and extinguishing it in the ashtray on the nightstand without, however, rising from his position on his back, "wouldn't it be more honest even, for you to confess that my inheritance made your mouth water? You wanted to see whether you could frighten me and squeeze that promise out of me!"

At that rejoinder Andreina felt another wave of that same frantic wretchedness that had swept over her an hour earlier as she cringed under his scorn for her beauty. Yes, she thought, that was her fate! In meanness, in baseness, she could never play better than second to her old master in such things! She looked at the invalid, haggard, furious, gnashing her teeth. A thousand thoughts rioted tumultuously through her brain, but the only one that gave her the slightest relief was the thought that soon she would have her vengeance by involving him inextricably in the fruitful crime she was contemplating.

Suddenly she remembered that she had not had her bath, that the water had been running for a long time and had probably filled the tub to overflowing. She rose without speaking and stepped into the bathroom.

As she had foreseen, the tub had been filled to the safety outlet with a green sparkling water. She turned off the faucet, swung the door to, and then with a movement of her shoulders freed herself of her dressing-gown. It crumpled to the floor. Tiptoeing naked over the cold tiling, she assembled her soap, towels, and a collection of sponges and brushes. These preparations, and especially the prospect immediately before her, calmed her raging emotions somewhat. Soon, in fact, she would be plunging her whole naked skin into that warm, soothing water, and she could relax, there in that small silent room, resting her eyes in the faint but adequate glow that entered through the frosted windowpanes. She would have time to think, think quietly, clearly, at her leisure. A hot bath. Yes, that would be the thing to give her the clarity of mind and the tranquillity of spirit that she would absolutely need if she were to go forward with her plans.

Greedily she spread a rough bath towel on a stool within reach of the tub; then steadying herself with a hand against the pipe that led to the shower, she plunged a foot into the deep water.

But she withdrew it with a cry and leapt back. The water was ice-cold. With an angry shiver she stepped to the gas heater that rested on a support in the corner. Peering into it she saw that it too was cold and that the pilot light was not functioning. She touched a match to it, but it failed to respond.

A cold, bloodthirsty wrath filled her whole being. She pulled furiously at the bell-rope time after time, then she sat down on the stool and began to dry her wet leg.

There came a knock at the door, then the door opened a few inches, and Cecilia's face appeared in the gap.

"My bath is cold!" said Andreina.

Cecilia evinced no surprise.

"Of course! You knew that! . . . The hot-water heater gave out yesterday. It seems they've got to take it all apart." And she stood there, gazing quietly now at Andreina, who was crouching naked on the stool, now at the tub filled with cold green water, now at the other things that lay about in the little room. "If you wish I can set the wash-boiler on the kitchen stove——"

She did not have time to finish. Andreina had reached out and seized one of the many wooden-heeled shoes that hung in lines along the wall. Cecilia had just been able to slam the door when the shoe struck in the exact spot where her head had been a second before.

Alone again, Andreina went to the washbowl and took a cold sponge bath as best she could. Then she went back to the bedroom. Stefano was again reading the newspaper, lying flat on his back. Without speaking or otherwise concerning herself with his presence, she began to dress. The business of putting on stockings, hooking garters, buttoning buttons, balancing laces with nude spots, linens with silk, colours with colours, had always given her the greatest amusement. Even at times when, as then, some strong preoccupation obscured the pleasure, she found the task of dressing a sort of relaxation that never failed to relieve her mind. In silence, therefore, and without any particular thoughts, she completed her toilet and she had stepped in front of the bureau to rouge her lips before the mirror when the door opened and Cecilia appeared.

"The dressmaker is here," Cecilia explained. "She says she wants to see you. She's in the sitting-room."

For Cecilia and all others about the house who were not in Andreina's secret, Rosa, Maria Luisa's maid, was a dressmaker, and so both her actual employment and the real character of her relations with Andreina had remained unknown to everyone. But Andreina had talked to her the day before and had not expected to see her again until that evening. She was therefore not a little concerned at this early call.

"Tell her I'll be there at once," she answered dryly, without turning around. The door swung to. Andreina finished painting her lips; then she picked up a phial of perfume and, studying herself thoughtfully, earnestly, in the mirror, touched her nostrils, the lobes of her ears, her throat, and her open breast with the stopper. It was a warm, heavy, fleshlike perfume as of a mass of flowers that had been torn to pieces and drowned in some ethereal fluid. It must have been strong enough to reach Stefano's nostrils, for without looking up from his paper he exclaimed in a dreamy, greedy, absent-minded voice:

"What a good perfume! What a wonderful smell!"

Andreina made no reply. She set the bottle down and left the room.

She found Rosa in the little parlour, sitting on the divan in the shade of her broad flat hat and sadly contemplating the floor in front of her. Her dejected air, along with her unforeseen visit at that hour in the forenoon, confirmed Andreina in a suspicion that had at once occurred to her. "She has come to tell me that she is afraid, that she is drawing out." Andreina therefore adopted a firm self-confident expression and advanced slowly towards the woman.

"I told you not to come!" she began. "It's taking unnecessary risks. . . . What has happened?"

Rosa raised her head and looked at her mentor in crime from under the broad brim of her hat.

"Nothing has happened," she replied, somewhat cowed. She lowered her eyes again.

Calm, businesslike, Andreina sat down in her turn, took a cigarette, and lighted it. Then she leaned forward with the cigarette between her lips, half closing her eyes to avoid the smoke.

"You cannot have come for nothing," she continued, in a reasoning tone that betrayed no interest or concern. "So then—let's have it! . . . Has anything unusual turned up? Perhaps Maria Luisa will not be at home this evening! . . ."

"No, she'll be there," Rosa answered, still dejected, feeling of the cover on the stand with the ends of her fingers.

Annoyed, but still self-contained, Andreina removed the cigarette from between her lips, and flicked off the ash into the ashtray.

"So she'll be at home! Well, then—perhaps the problem is to keep Carlino away!"

"I'm not worrying about Carlino!" the woman again answered, positive.

"So nothing's wrong!" concluded Andreina. "Everything in order! Why then did you come—and why so glum?"

The woman seemed to struggle with a great reluctance to explain herself.

"The fact is," she finally confessed, turning part way around, "the fact is—I'm afraid. That's what's the matter!"

"Just as I expected!" thought Andreina, grating her teeth to control the anger that suddenly laid hold on her. Any unwillingness on the maid's part at that particular moment might upset her whole plan. She had to overcome it at any cost. Assuming an overbearing manner, mustering all her will, she extinguished her cigarette and took a seat on the couch at Rosa's side.

"In the first place, take off that hat!" she said in a commanding tone, herself removing the grotesque top-piece from the woman's head and tossing it disrespectfully upon a chair. "Now tell me what it's all about. Be as clear as you can and don't hold anything back. I am here to know things and I promise that if you give any good reason why we should not go ahead, I'll be the first to postpone everything. So then, to begin with: Why are you afraid—what are you afraid of?"

Andreina's self-confidence, her reasonableness, and at the same time her polite social manner were well calculated to rehearten the woman. But she seemed not even to have heard a word. She sat there with wide-opened eyes, nervously smoothing back her hair and picking with her fingernails at the protruding knots in the rough cloth cover on the stand. The usual silly smile that hung about her large asymmetrical mouth gave an agonized expression to her pale, tremulous, somewhat puffy face.

"For one thing," she began, looking steadily in front of her and arching her eyebrows, "if we are found out, it will be something terrible."

Andreina did not let her finish. Cold, didactic, she replied:

"Just try to think! Were we found out in the case of the jewels? Well, why should we be found out this time, when the chances of succeeding are equally good?"

The woman lowered her head.

"I understand that," she agreed after a time. "But you see—I don't know how to say it. . . . Well, really now, it isn't just that I'm afraid of being found out. Jewels? That's nothing! I didn't mind! It wasn't doing her any great harm. With all her money, it was like taking a glass of water from the sea. . . . But kill her? I'm afraid! Perhaps we won't be found out. But I'll worry. I'll think of it all the time. I'll never be easy in my mind again. Well—what will a life like that be worth—with that on my conscience? . . . I'm an ignorant woman, that I know. . . ." Densely obstinate she lowered her head in a humility that she by no means felt. "I don't know how to say just what I mean—I feel that a thing like that . . . well, no good can come of it—there! . . ."

Furiously angry inside, Andreina also felt powerless before an obstinacy that was all the more impregnable since it rested on a feeling and not on a reasoning. She let herself go.

"So then what?" Her voice was harsh, aggressive. "Perhaps you would prefer that I should go to Maria Luisa and say: 'Look—Rosa took your jewels at my suggestion! Have us both arrested!' "

The woman kept her eyes glued to the rug in front of her. Now and again she smoothed her hair with her two hands. However, she made no answer, and finally Andreina seized her nervously by an arm and shook it.

"Tell me, I say! . . . Shall I do it?"

The maid seemed to meditate, and finally answered, positive, unshakable:

"Yes, I think I should like that better. Better that, I say, than a bad conscience all the rest of my life!"

Andreina now perceived that she had chosen the wrong tactics. Rosa's fear would prove stronger in the end than any impulse of interest. She would never change under this sort of intimidation. Andreina therefore decided to try a different appeal.

"Now see here, Rosa,"—she began in a frank, friendly, intimate manner—"no—lift your head up—look at me! Have I ever given you any reason to think that I was not fond of you, that I did not love you?"

"No," agreed the other, greatly relieved at the change of topic, but still apprehensive. "I never said you had."

"Well, then!" Andreina continued. "Do you think I would have asked you to help me this time, unless I had thought everything over a thousand times, and asked myself a thousand times: 'What will this mean for Rosa? Am I asking too much of Rosa? How can I save Rosa from all of the possible consequences?'? Do you think that being as fond of you as I am I have not taken account of everything and provided against every chance?"

The woman raised her head and looked at Andreina, her face showing the same silly smile that was more like the grimace of a death agony than an expression of gaiety. Like a weeping child that has been won by a mother's coaxing and forgotten its recent hurt, she seemed to be enchanted. However, she did not speak.

Andreina looked straight into the woman's faltering eyes with her own dark, resolute gaze.

"Now listen to me carefully! You won't have anything on your conscience, because I assume all the responsibility myself." She pointed a finger at her own chest. "The idea is mine, the plan is mine, the doing of it is mine! I know why I am doing it. I have good reasons for doing it. I shall have no remorse—I can tell you that!" Her voice took on a harsh, strident intonation, as suddenly she grew inspired. "All this talk about remorse is nonsense anyway. Remorse is a stupid invention of people who always feel remorse whatever they do. If you start having remorse, you'll have it for the most innocent things—for a kiss, a word, a shake of the hand. If you know what you are about, if you know why you are doing what you do, if you are resolved from the very first not to regret anything, why, then, even the death of a woman like Maria Luisa will not cause you the slightest worry. That's the way it was with the jewels. It was the devil's own job to get you to take them. Afterwards you were surprised, yourself, that you had hesitated so long. Here's the way it is, and it ought to convince you: Killing Maria Luisa is about as serious a matter as killing the first dog you meet on the street—it's not half as bad as that would be, for there are dogs that people like, and there are useful dogs. But show me anybody who likes Maria Luisa, and what is she good for, even to herself? I can assure you that the only thing that would keep me from killing her would be fear that I might be found out. I'm not afraid of that, because the way I have arranged everything it is absolutely impossible for me to be found out. Anyway, I repeat: If there has to be any fear, it is for me to fear." Again she pointed her index finger at her own chest, but she felt very tired and almost ready to faint. She rallied her strength for a last effort. "I'm the only one who has to worry. Now when a person says to you: 'I take all the responsibility,' you have no further worry, because you have become just an instrument and your conscience is clear. The fault, if there is any fault, belongs not to you, but to the person for whom you are working." She could see that the woman had been in no sense persuaded by the rambling, captious, feverish argument—Rosa still sat sullen and silent. "Anyway," Andreina concluded, "if you prefer not to help me, if you don't feel you have courage enough to help me—well, you don't have to! In that case I ask just one thing of you, and that, not so much in my interest, as in yours: I want you to be out of the house when I call. That will keep you from being involved in any slightest way, and if everything goes well, you will share in any profit just the same."

This last concession had been made in a harsh, cold, contemptuous tone. Andreina then picked up another cigarette, lighted it, and sat smoking with her head lowered. She seemed to be thinking.

There was silence for a time, Andreina smoking, the woman gazing about the room with nervous, uncertain, bewildered eyes.

"But if I am not there," she finally asked, "who will let you in?"

"Maria Luisa will let me in," replied Andreina, without looking up.

"And so," pressed the woman, after a moment, "I shall have nothing at all to do with it?"

"Nothing at all!" echoed Andreina.

"And no responsibility?" Rosa seemed to grasp at Andreina's phrase as at a ritualistic formula that she may not have understood but which had magical virtues all the same. "The responsibility will all be yours?"

"It will all be mine!"

Rosa was now toying with the fringe of the cover on the stand.

"It will be as if . . . as if you had got into the house without my knowing?"

"Just so." There was another interval of silence. "And whether you are willing or not," Andreina added slowly, distinctly, "I am going ahead just the same. You could stop me only in one way—by going to the police and telling on me. But in that case the business of the jewels would come out, and that would be the end of you too."

Andreina was well aware that in that she was formulating a definite threat.

But a new worry seemed to occur to the maid. With some embarrassment she asked:

"How about afterwards? . . . Afterwards, all that money will go to Signor Davico?"

In her tense and angry uneasiness Andreina had quite forgotten that greed more than anything else had provided her with this so necessary and so trustworthy confederate. She raised her head and looked with shining eyes into Rosa's hesitating face.

"Of course—that's understood. Certainly, everything will be Signor Davico's. That means—ours!"

A sort of awkward shrewdness glittered in the maid's shifting, fearful eyes.

"It will all be his," she remarked. "And if I don't help, it's only fair that I shouldn't receive anything!"

To that, partly by design, partly from sheer weariness, Andreina made no reply.

The woman was again silent for a time. When she spoke it was in a tone of chatty irrelevance, as though she were talking just to convince herself and quiet her nerves.

"Of course, if one thinks of the use he will make of it, one might almost say that it would be better if someone else were to get it."

"That's the way I feel," said Andreina, again without looking up. And she repeated after a moment: "I have said that myself, over and over again."

The woman looked around the room, almost satisfied. Gossip was a sort of sedative drug to her. More given to envying than to hating, to petty meanness than to cruelty, she felt that to gossip about Maria Luisa was in a sense to recover her again as someone close to her and whom she knew, after having lost her in the remote, frightening picture that Andreina had drawn of her in her too lucid and definite argument.

"It seems that now she has tired of Carlino too," Rosa resumed apropos of nothing, without changing the idle chatty tone she had used in her judgment of Stefano. "And she seems to be making up with her husband. But you never can tell, with that woman. Three days ago she had me pack up—oh, in such a hurry! Yes, sir—she was going away for winter sports, she was! And then? Nothing of the kind! She had changed her mind! This very morning again she asked me how I would like to go to Paris with her, and a few minutes later it was Sicily. The truth is she doesn't know what she wants. Just imagine! Her husband has been there to see her no less than five separate times, and each time they locked themselves into the drawing-room and talked and talked. She doesn't know even now whether she's going back to him, or whether she isn't! And then—nervous? That's no name for it! A scene for every trifle! There's all the money she spends on her clothes, but yesterday she sent the cook away because she was short a few lire in her accounts! Such a fuss over nothing. Why, I almost offered to make them up out of my own pay! . . . But then later I could see that she really sent the cook away because she is thinking of giving up the villa and going back to her husband."

A silence followed. The woman's shallow gossip had given Andreina a dark and pitiless satisfaction. It did her good to feel that in arriving unwittingly at the end of her life Maria Luisa should still be drifting passively about in hesitancy and indecision, that she should be souring more and more in temper every day, not knowing how to enjoy the many good things she possessed nor how to obtain the many, many more that she did not possess. In those circumstances, Andreina reasoned, it was only fair to strip her of everything, bring her to the ugly, undignified end that she deserved. Andreina reasoned that way, but she sat there mute and still, her eyes opened wide in hate.

"How old is she?" she finally asked.

"Not less than forty," Rosa replied. She had regained self-confidence, but still could not help looking at Andreina every now and again out of frightened, apprehensive, unsatisfied eyes. "So then," she suddenly added. "You are going ahead?"

"Absolutely!"

"All alone?"

They looked at each other.

"Just why did you ask that question?" asked Andreina, trying to give her eyes an imperious, hypnotic fixity.

Rosa shrugged her shoulders.

"To tell the truth," she answered, "I am scared when I think of your doing that. How can you manage all by yourself? Where will you get the strength?"

"I am strong enough," said Andreina, pale, very grave.

"But if she notices beforehand?" the maid persisted. "Supposing she screams and tries to run away?"

Andreina's heart began to beat violently. She put a hand to her side and gave a deep sigh as though to force more air into her lungs.

"Nothing will go wrong," she finally said, hard, merciless, but finding it difficult to speak. "It's all a matter of getting started. Once I have gone at it, I cannot help proving to be the stronger."

Rosa looked at her doubtfully.

"But just supposing! Supposing she gets away! They will get you, and you will be condemned."

Andreina nodded.

"Yes, I shall be arrested and condemned."

"And I won't?" asked Rosa again. "Nothing will happen to me? That's the way it is, isn't it?"

Andreina concluded that the frightened woman needed still more reassuring.

"Of course—I promised you that. I won't betray you. When I have promised, it ought to be enough for you. I keep my promises."

Again they looked at each other. Something strange was going on in the woman's mind. From low down on her throat an unhealthy flush seemed to rise and spread out over all the thick, livid, opaque skin on her face. Her eyes showed hesitancy and at the same time exhilaration.

"Just take it as though I hadn't come here this morning," she said suddenly.

Andreina pretended not to understand.

"What do you mean by that?"

"By that I mean"—and the silly smile broadened and seemed for once to express a real happiness—"by that I mean that I have changed my mind. If all this is to go through, it isn't fair that you should be in danger and I not. Just take it as though I hadn't come here now. Everything stands as it did last night."

She smiled, gently shaking her head, with its flushed, strangely livid face, while tears glistened unpleasantly in her animal-like eyes. Finally she shook herself and, turning, she dropped her eyes upon the stand, where they came to rest on the two little cordial glasses, brimming with liqueur, and on the uncorked bottle that stood beside them.

"What is that—brandy?" she asked. "Might I take a sip?"

Andreina sat looking at her with an astonished pensive intentness. She came to herself with a start.

"Take what's in the glasses there," she answered. "It was poured last night, but no one has touched it."

The woman did not wait to be urged. She leaned cautiously over the little table and picked up one of the glasses. Her hand was shaking so violently that some of the brandy spilled over and fell upon the rug.

"A sign of good luck!" said Rosa.

Stooping over, she wet the ends of her fingers in the fallen liqueur and touched Andreina on the forehead and on her two temples. Then she picked up the glass again, emptied it at one gulp, and looked into the bottom of it.

"It's good!" she said. "You are not taking any?"

Andreina shook her head. As she looked at the woman she could not help asking herself just why Rosa had changed her mind and again decided to help. Greed? Affection? Perhaps a mixture of the two? She felt that she was altogether too tired to solve the riddle just then. She had always had an unpleasant feeling towards the woman, a mixture of repugnance and unwilling loyalty. However, Rosa's impulsive self-reversal awakened no sort of gratitude or tenderness in her. She felt only the placid, indifferent surprise of a person who finds himself engaged in a dangerous enterprise and suddenly notes that he is receiving, against all logic, a support which he had in no sense foreseen. "In her place I would carefully keep clear of this whole business," she thought, vaguely. "If she comes in, she must have her good reasons for doing so."

Meanwhile she held the woman under her steady gaze. She saw her swallow the contents of the second glass as she had done the first, though not in one gulp but with a series of thoughtful, meditative, savouring sips. Then she seemed finally to yield to a temptation that was greater than her powers of resistance. Hesitating a second, she shot out a hand, laid violent hold on the bottle, lifted it up against the light, and studied it with a greedy possessive leer in her eye. She filled the glass again and emptied it at a swallow. Andreina noted that the trembling had altogether disappeared from her hand. After the third glass she sat motionless for a time, looking into the air in front of her. Then with staring eyes she wagged her head powerfully to and fro several times, as though trying to work the intoxicating emanations into the remoter recesses of her being. Finally a new light seemed to dawn upon her. Her hand shot out to the bottle again, and one after the other, in a mute, concentrated, overpowering eagerness, she poured and swallowed five more glasses of the brandy. Andreina had long known of this weakness in her former nurse, but she had never seen her actually in the presence of liquor. She was quite astounded to note the frenzy of her greediness.

After the fifth swallow in the series, Rosa wagged her head again and blinked with a satisfied air. Finally she lapsed into a tense contemplation of the cover on the stand. She lingered in that silent motionless condition for long minutes that seemed endless to Andreina. Then with the same impulsive fury with which she had reached for the brandy, she leapt to her feet, picked up her huge absurd hat, clapped it upon her head, and asked:

"Where are the jewels?"

The blood in Andreina's veins gave a great surge.

"The jewels?" she repeated slowly. "Where are the jewels? Why, they are in my room."

Rosa made straight for the door.

"Let's go and see them!" she proposed. As she stared out from under her toadstool of a hat, her squatty figure tottering perceptibly, there seemed to be something unreasoning as well as threatening in her aggressiveness. "Drunk as she is," thought Andreina, "she'll go into my bedroom, find Stefano there, fail to find the jewels, blame the loss on him, make a scene, and turn the whole neighbourhood upside down." Terrified, determined to halt the catastrophe at whatever cost, she rushed after the woman and caught her by an arm, meanwhile thinking up an explanation.

"I have to tell you, Rosa," she said, hesitating. "It wouldn't be wise to go into my bedroom just now. Pietro is there. He just dropped in for a call. You know how he is. We had better not bring him into this matter."

The maid proffered no reply. The brim of her hat was too wide for Andreina to make out the expression on her face. She merely saw her stride across the reception-room, reach the door and open it, and then with a "See you this evening!" that was strangely gay and satisfied, move on with a slight stagger into the outer hall.

Andreina sighed with relief. She did not shut the door but let herself fall back against the jamb in the open doorway. She closed her eyes. The strain of holding her confederate to their bargain had been almost too much for her. She felt as though she had come to the end of all her strength and were about to collapse.

IV

It was a little after four o'clock on the afternoon of the same day. Coming in very tired from a night and day of work, Pietro had thrown himself down, fully dressed, upon the bed in his room at the hotel. He had hardly fallen asleep when he thought he heard someone calling:

"Pietro! Pietro!"

The voice was so low, and seemed to come from so far away, that he thought he had dreamed rather than heard it. Deciding to ignore it, he was about to plunge again into the dark and delicious entanglement of slumber, when the call came again, but this time more loudly and more distinctly, and accompanied by the definite and far from unreal sensation of a hand pressing upon his shoulder. "It's really somebody," he thought, still sleeping.

He awoke, opened his eyes, and stared at the wall in front of him.

"But, Pietro! Come! Wake up!"

The voice he well knew, but the tone was strange, almost weird—it gave him a shiver. He turned his head towards it, and there, standing erect at his bedside, he saw Andreina.

She was very pale. She was wearing a soft hat with the brim pulled down to hide her fixed, sparkling eyes. The mass of her hair was combed straight back behind her ears. Her black dress was drawn in tight about her tall robust figure by a belt. She was looking at him with a hard, impassive dreaminess.

"So you decided finally to wake up!" she remarked in a low voice.

Pietro rubbed his eyes, brushed a hand over his hair, and sat up on the edge of the bed.

"I was very tired," he answered, pulling his necktie into place. "But, you—what on earth are you doing here?"

Andreina made no reply. She walked with her silent, stately stride to the bureau and took off her hat, looking at herself attentively in the mirror.

Partly because of the short winter's day, partly because of a stormy sky that had been thickening over the city all the afternoon, there was no light in the room save a ring of cold brightness that seemed to hang in the neighbourhood of the window, leaving everything else in gloom. Still without speaking, Andreina dragged a chair up to the bed and sat down, crossing one leg over the other and looking at Pietro with a haggard earnestness, as though she were about to burst either into tears or into a loud lament.

"What's going on downstairs?" she finally asked, finding her words with difficulty. "A masquerade for children? The place was crowded, mostly with ladies and young ones in costume. They must have thought I was a mother too. Before I could tell them what I wanted, they had shown me into the ballroom."

This was the first time that Andreina had ventured into her lover's room at the hotel. Perhaps because of the faint, dispiriting light in the room, perhaps because of her extreme pallor, Pietro thought her face wore a sad, an incredibly sad, expression. However, he could not help being thrilled at the sight of her. He gazed and gazed.

"I dare say," he finally replied. "They sometimes have children's parties here. But tell me—why did you come? Couldn't you have telephoned?"

Again Andreina fell silent and sat looking at him.

"It was something I couldn't talk about over the phone," she answered, after a time.

"But what is it?"

Again she failed to speak. Pietro had been struck all along by her paleness and her mysterious manner. He now lost patience, rose from the bed, sat down on the arm of her chair, seized her by the two shoulders, and shook her.

"In Heaven's name—tell me what it is!" he repeated. "What's the matter with you today? You say a word, then you break off. You say another, then you fall mum again!"

Andreina's head bobbed backwards and forwards like a doll's under the shaking. She was looking straight ahead, but from the vacant stare in her eyes it was evident that she was under the sway of a controlling preoccupation and was not really thinking or looking at anything.

"This is the point," she declared at last, brusquely. "I want those jewels."

Not a day had passed since the breaking of his engagement to Sofia that Pietro had not urged Andreina to call on Maria Luisa, confess the theft of the jewels, and give them back to her. He thought that that act of restitution had to be the first, as it would be the most important, stone in the edifice of persuasion and redemption that he had resolved to build, that apart from it nothing good could come of anything, that on it depended his marrying Andreina, their future life together, and the possibility of her changing and becoming the sort of woman he wanted her to be. He had promised to go with her to Maria Luisa's. He had guaranteed that Maria Luisa would never report her to the police. He had argued. He had begged. In spite of everything, now on one pretext, now on another, Andreina had always found a way to postpone the humiliating visit. Great therefore was his joy when he inferred that she had finally resigned herself to the painful step. He decided, however, to pretend that he had not drawn that inference.

"The jewels?" he echoed. "Why? Do you want to give them back?"

Had it not been for the wave of tense, anxious hope that completely engulfed him, Pietro might have noticed that the look that Andreina gave him expressed a depth of resentment, and a merciless sarcasm. "Give them back!" she thought to herself. "How little the idiot knows me! Not only will I not give anything back—I will strip her of what she still has." Without changing her expression of haggard, almost tearful gravity, she answered:

"Yes! I am going to take them back to her."

Beaming, thrilling with hope, Pietro pressed with his two hands hard against the girl's inert, forward-bent shoulders, then leaned over and kissed her on the neck. What did it matter, he thought, that she had come to inform him of her resolve with the cold ashen face of a convict on the way to the scaffold? In view of the temperament she was cursed with and the life she had led, attached as she was to habits that were so different from the ones he was anxious to have her develop, it was understandable, only too understandable, that the step she was about to take should seem humiliating, hard, and perhaps useless, and that it should cost her dearly to take it. The important thing was that she had come around to taking it, and of her own accord, apart from any constraint. "If she has been strong enough to make this decision, she will be strong enough to do all the rest," he thought. He looked at her, happy with a new happiness that was fraught with untold hope, and he wanted her to share it with him.

"Andreina," he suddenly exclaimed, "I cannot tell you how glad I am to hear you say that! I was thinking over our situation this morning. Then it seemed that everything was going so badly!"

Andreina turned her head, and her lips moved, but she failed to say anything.

"But now," Pietro resumed, "you must not feel badly at having come to a decision like this. Of course it will be humiliating. We can rely upon it—Maria Luisa will not understand. She may even insult you. But you, never mind what she does! What will a moment's discomfort be as compared with the immense advantage of your having voluntarily—that's the important thing, voluntarily—reached this decision and acted on it?" He shook his head in strong conviction, and looked at the girl. She still sat pale and silent. In view of his own confidence and excitedly welling hope he was again surprised that she did not share his mood. He thought, therefore, that he should return to the attack, trying to mitigate, as far as he could, the sense of humiliation that he assumed she must be feeling. "Oh, I understand—don't imagine I don't understand! There is another sort of humiliation, too—the humiliation of abandoning, for laudable motives, an attitude, a demeanour, a manner of living, which has become a matter of vanity and pride with us. I have had just such humiliations, and that is why I understand you."

"Yes, he certainly understands me!" thought Andreina She deemed Pietro's lectures a mass of sickly, disconnected patter, and the absurd, ironical contrast between his view of her and what she was actually feeling filled her with a sarcastic dejection that was frankly painful. She would have been willing enough to go away and let him preach himself hoarse to the bare walls, had she known what better to do with the two or three hours that she still had to pass before evening.

"No," she replied, briefly. "I feel no humiliation. In that you are mistaken."

"Well, then," he pressed, "why so sad—when you ought to be, I don't say gay exactly, but at least satisfied with yourself?"

He bent over and tried to kiss her on the neck again. But Andreina held him off.

"Don't, please! I don't feel like that!" And after a moment she resumed, frigidly: "Perhaps I shall be satisfied with myself this evening, when everything is over. For the moment I have no grounds for feeling satisfied. To say you are going to do a thing doesn't mean that you have done it."

Such a fine and conscientious distinction could not have been more to Pietro's liking. Not only did it show the extent of Andreina's goodwill. It showed, he thought, the influence he had himself been exerting, and a touch of complacency crept into his pleasure. Following the line of his own thoughts, he resumed:

"Never mind that sort of thing, Andreina! What counts is the fact that you have decided! Just think what a change in a bare month! Why, a month ago—you may have forgotten but I remember, because, really, the thing shocked me—so far were you from any willingness to return the jewels that—in a moment of despair, to be sure—you actually talked of killing Maria Luisa! How you got that idea into your head, and why, I cannot imagine! You certainly had it!"

Andreina exhibited a stony face. Calm, remote, she asked, speaking quietly, distinctly:

"Were you very much shocked—really shocked?"

Pietro was fumbling for a box of matches in his pockets.

"I was—there can be no doubt about it, though I thought, as I said, that you were just in a particularly despondent mood."

"What did you think?" asked Andreina, showing a considerable interest, complacent. "That I was a criminal, a lunatic?"

"No," replied Pietro, thoughtfully. "I was worried. I supposed it was because I saw that you had been capable of stealing jewels. That gave me grounds for fearing for a moment that you might be capable of killing Maria Luisa, as you said you were. Luckily—and I think some of the credit belongs to me—you have recovered from that dangerous state of mind. You have halted on the incline down which you were slipping. I will not deny it: You certainly gave me a great fright!"

Andreina answered not a word. But Pietro's happy state of mind was making him talkative. He went on, after a moment:

"And there was another fright you gave me. That was when you granted the possibility of your becoming Stefano's mistress again. You know, if anything, that struck me as something worse, and certainly as something more disastrous, than stealing Maria Luisa's jewels. . . . To tell the full truth," he added, nervously, "I saw myself lost that afternoon when you went and put your arms around him on a dare!"

Andreina bit her lips. Then she asked, pretending a mild interest, and even some amusement:

"Really? You thought it such a terrible thing for me to become Stefano's mistress again?"

"What I thought," Pietro answered quickly, "was that if you could do that, you were quite capable of doing anything else—even of killing Maria Luisa! See what I mean? In my eyes it would have been a proof of your capacities, I don't say for doing wrong, but for giving in to your impulses however mad."

Andreina suddenly rose.

"How stuffy it is in this room!" she exclaimed, annoyed.

She went to the window and, without more ado, threw it noisily open and leaned out over the window-sill.

The room looked down into the inner court and was situated directly over the glass-and-cement cupola of the hotel dining-room. Andreina gazed at the cupola for a time. Perhaps because of the waning light, or the stormy sky, it had a dusty, dirty look. The frosted panes were sprinkled with bits of waste paper, and here and there was an orange peel, dry, yellow, that had been tossed from some upper window. A window down on the court must have led into the hotel kitchens, for through it came sounds of voices and of rattling dishes. She raised her eyes to look for the sky and found it beyond the tops of the high, smooth white walls that enclosed the courtyard. It was black with clouds. At just that moment she could see moving against the background of the sky beyond the parapets the heads of two maids. They kept disappearing and reappearing, as they hastily gathered in some clothes that had been hung out on the flat roof of the hotel to air or dry. A strong wind must have been blowing, for the clothes and the aprons of the maids could be seen flapping, white as snow, against the ominous storm clouds.

Andreina considered them for a time with her face upraised. Gusts of wind kept striking her cheeks and disarranging her hair. Finally she turned towards the room again.

"I'll have to be going," she said. "Where are the jewels?"

Pietro had sat down on the bed across the rapidly darkening room. He rose, stepped to Andreina's side, and slipped an arm about her waist.

"You really must go?" he began, tensely, rapidly, trying to draw her to him. "You want to? Why not stay a little while? I think I have never loved you as I do today, so—how shall I say?—so happily, so hopefully!" And exhilarated, throbbing with emotion, he pressed that gorgeous, youthful, indolent form against his own, stroking her cheek with his hand.

But Andreina remained cold, inert. A strange, a mortal insensibility seemed to have come over her. Pietro could not help perceiving it in the end. He swung around in front of her, holding her by the belt and looking into her eyes.

"Really now, Andreina!" he exclaimed. "It may be the poor light in the room or it may be for some other reason. Anyhow, you don't seem to me to be feeling the way you ought to feel. You ought to be happy at having made the decision you have made—you ought to be cheerful, hopeful. Instead, you are sad. That is not the word: You are funereal! Why? I am beginning to think you cannot be realizing what you have done and are going to do."

Had it not been, in fact, for the deep twilight Pietro would surely have observed that Andreina's lips were trembling. Quite against her will she could feel her tears all but getting the best of her.

"Oh, no!" she answered, mastering herself. Her words took on a dark allusive resonance from their hidden meaning. "I realize perfectly what I have done and what I am going to do."

"Then you ought to be happy, exceedingly happy!" Pietro insisted.

Andreina tried to sketch a smile, without quite succeeding.

"Well?" she asked. "Do I seem so sad?"

"I corrected that: funereal!" exclaimed Pietro, vivacious, gay.

Really Andreina had never felt such a yearning for abandonment, for intimacy and trust; but she knew that never had the obstacles that stood in the way of complete trust, of real abandonment, seemed so insurmountable. She considered for a moment, as in a daze, the confident, excited face that the young man was holding out towards hers. Then she freed herself from his grasp and drew away to the middle of the room.

"The bad light is misleading you," she cried. "I am not more sad, or if you wish, more funereal, than I ordinarily am. . . . And now, tell me—where are the jewels?"

Disappointed, Pietro stepped to the window and closed it.

"They are in that bag there in the corner," he answered. "And here is the key."

The darkness in the room had deepened. Andreina went to the door and turned on the light.

"It's certainly small, this room of yours," she said, looking about and squinting her eyes under the bright glare. She was at some pains to seem cool and unconcerned. "So—where is the bag? That one there?"

The bag was resting on a stool in the corner. It had the dull, bedraggled appearance of objects that have been lying about unused for a long time. Andreina opened it and felt around with her hand, inside among the old newspaper clippings that half filled it.

"They are not there!" she cried, straightening up.

Pietro had been washing his hands at his washbowl, with his back turned towards her. He started violently, then paled, trembling all over. Slowly raising his head he caught the image of the girl reflected in the mirror in front of him.

"What do you mean—they are not there?" he cried in his turn, almost shouting. "Oh, yes! Of course!" he added, his voice softening. "You are looking for the box! They are not in the box. They are loose, in the pocket inside. I threw the box away. Look in the pocket."

"Yes, here they are!" said Andreina.

Pietro rested his weight on his hands on the washstand. His fright had unnerved him.

Andreina dropped the jewels into her purse and snapped the bag shut again. Then she too approached the mirror to put on her hat.

By that time Pietro was wiping his face and hands with a towel.

"Listen to me!" he said. "You go right in to Maria Luisa, and you say, simply, quietly, but without embarrassment or shame: 'Here, marchesa, are your jewels! Blame no one but me! It was I who stole them.' If she starts calling you names, or otherwise treats you badly, just say nothing! Don't talk back—put up with everything. Whatever you get, it's all you can expect, it's all you deserve. Now if, after all, by some accursed chance, Maria Luisa makes any threats, says for instance that she's going to have you arrested, or what not, you come and get me, or else send someone to get me. I shall wait at your house till eight o'clock. However spiteful and quick-tempered Maria Luisa may be, I can't believe that she will think of doing anything. She would hardly have a right to, once the jewels have been restored to her. But in any case, remember: I shall be at your house. If anything happens, send for me—or better, telephone!"

"All right!" said Andreina.

She finished with her hat and began rouging her lips. A silence followed. Pietro felt nervous, excited, he could not say whether from anxiety or satisfaction. Unable to stand still, he kept walking restlessly about the room, stopping now to one side, now to the other of his mistress, who stood tall, erect, motionless, before the mirror.

"Just notice one thing, Andreina," he remarked suddenly. "The facts are working out on my side. That's one reason why I'm so happy. Do you remember that time when I said we were alike, and you wouldn't hear of such a thing? Well, here we are both doing the very same thing in different ways. We had both set out in mistaken directions under the drive of mistaken ambitions. Now both of us—each in a different way, to be sure—are changing tack——"

"By the way," interrupted Andreina. His enthusiastic harangues were proving unbearably disconcerting and annoying to her. "Guess who dropped in to see me today? . . . Matteo!"

"Matteo?!" cried Pietro, brought down to earth. "What did he want?"

"Naturally," Andreina replied in a calm but disgusted tone, "he wanted to begin again. You can see his game. I have been unfaithful, so I can't expect him to marry me. It's a good moment, therefore, to propose going back to the *status quo ante.*"

"Well—what did you say?"

"I swept him out of the house. . . . Naturally," she added, "I was tempted. I can't imagine how I'll be paying my rent and all the rest a month from now. I've got to find someone to keep me."

"We'll get married!" cried Pietro, back in the clouds again. "If we agree, if we set out with aims far different from those we have been following hitherto, it's not money that's going to trouble us. Besides, perhaps I'll change to some kind of work where I can make more money."

Andreina had finished painting her lips. She stepped towards the door.

"Well—good-bye!" she said. Her lips began to tremble and her face fell into an expression of that tortured, squalid gravity that comes over the person who is prey to an unspeakable horror, an unbearable sorrow, and would like to confide in someone but cannot.

Pietro was too rapt in his own soaring thoughts to be aware of her varying moods and their symptoms.

"So I'll see you this evening!" he cried, gaily, without turning around. He was already at work, arranging the papers on his table. "Remember," he called, "if anything happens, I shall be at your house!"

Andreina made no answer, and the door closed behind her.

V

PIETRO's room lay at the end of a long, low-ceilinged corridor, dimly lighted by electric bulbs that were fixed to the cross-beams. In that warm, neat, unmysterious half-light the strip of red carpet could be seen stretching away between two rows of white and gold doors till it debouched into a sort of vestibule more brightly lighted and walled with mirrors that were visible from the far end of the corridor. Whether because of the night-like stillness, or because she had finally managed to control her feelings, Andreina felt the unreasoned emotion that had come over her at her leave-taking from Pietro vanish the moment she had left his room. Her mind was clear and cold again. "How easy it is to get unnerved!" she mused, making her way slowly along the corridor towards the stairs. "How easy to forget! I almost gave myself away and told everything!"

That morning she had fixed on all details for that fatal day. She had decided that nothing whatever should be left to chance, that every minutest act on her part should be performed with the greatest care and accuracy as though she were working out a theorem in geometry. At four o'clock, a visit to Pietro; at half past five a visit to her family; then home, then straight to Maria Luisa's, and, finishing with her, home to Pietro again! She could not herself have told why such a coldly calculated plan gave her the pleasure it did. It may have been because of a feeling that she was acting in obedience to sound, undebatable principles and was therefore a mere instrument in the hands of a higher mechanism of fate; or she may have felt that the success of her plan now depended only on the finish with which she executed it.

Nevertheless, an involuntary allusion by Pietro to her secret intentions had been enough to shake her composure, upset the definite outline of acts and words that she carried in her mind, and bring upon her a sudden sense of horror and of disconcerting self-pity. "Now in my place," she reflected, "Stefano would not have felt an instant's emotion. I thought I had become past master at his game. It is evident that I am just a novice." However, that disgusted self-criticism bore only on the details of her crime and the manner of its execution. Partly, perhaps, because of her mental indolence, partly because the resolve to commit it had taken deep root in a sense of justice within her, the crime itself was something that she took for granted, as an act that she had already discounted, along with all its consequences, and which she now had only to perform as a matter of routine. If someone had said to her at just that moment: "Don't do it, you are still in time to draw back—go home instead!" she would certainly have experienced a profound stupor, as though the earth had suddenly opened under her feet. Her whole life had come to rest on the sentence that she had pronounced and was now about to carry out. The irreparable character of the act filled her not with fear or repugnance, but with a cold conscious resolve. She did not recoil before it. It charmed her, rather, as a sort of liberation. In killing Maria Luisa she would be freeing herself of all the annoyances that Maria Luisa had come to personify in her mind—ambition, greed, distracted inconsistent feelings, prostration of intellect and will. But from now on, finally opening before her, she would find that courageous, hope-free life that she thought she had been born to, a life that was honest, true, and cleansed of all pretence.

Taking heart from that prospect, she went down the stairs from landing to landing till she reached the lobby, crossed the latter at her leisurely gait, pushed the mahogany turnstile door, and stopped on the sidewalk. Night had fallen. Thinking of the low black clouds that she had seen from Pietro's window, she was surprised that it was not yet raining. The wind, however, had doubled in violence and was blowing along the ground between the rows of buildings, spreading grim confusion about the narrow, crowded streets. As on every day at that hour, the sidewalks were cluttered thick with pedestrians, and two unbroken lines of automobiles were passing each other on the streets. The brilliant lighting in the plate-glass windows of the shops reached halfway up the fronts of the old time-worn edifices. But an observant eye would have noticed that the crowds were not moving with their ordinary composure. Here and there a woman's skirt was lifting in the wind. Men were holding the brims of their hats, or drawing the fronts of their coats together. The horse-cabs at the corners had their hoods and drivers' shelters up, and on the façades of the buildings, above the steady glare cast by the show windows, was an unreal, disquieting, strangely scattered play of other lights and shades that came from arc lamps violently swinging in the gale. It was not raining, but the black night air was dense with the ominous presence of storm.

Andreina was struck by another detail. As she looked up towards the clouds, she saw that all the balconies and windows showed flags that were black with crape and fixed at half mast. That too was a shock, and she was some time in remembering that a relative of the reigning family had died the night before. The many flags, with the black draperies and the mourning balls at the ends of the staffs, added something to the uncanny aspect of the city streets. Night though it was, she could make out the red, white, and green in the flags nearest to her—in fact, the colours seemed to acquire a strange vividness from the dark about them. But farther away they all blended with the shadows on the fronts of the buildings, so that the flags looked more like those time-honoured but faded, washed-out banners that are rescued from the forgotten interiors of chests and drawers on public holidays and displayed at the windows of historic palaces. Awed by this strange external coincidence with her mood, Andreina also observed that the many flags, some hanging out on staffs, others merely dangling from window-sills, somehow brought the two rows of the buildings that lined the long, narrowing street closer together at the top, so that they seemed to be toppling forward and about to collapse one upon the other. The flags that were on staffs flapped and snapped violently in the gale, while those that hung along the sides of the buildings would lift and then fall back with heavy, unpleasant, scraping sounds. As these noises reached her ears above the din of the traffic, Andreina would look up with a shiver, as though she expected to see just over her head some repulsive bird of carrion that had been blown by the tempest into that gully of houses and was flapping its wings in an effort to escape but could not manage to rise.

Shivering from the sudden change in temperature between the over-heated hotel room and the windy streets, she drew her dress tighter about her and went to a kiosk on the next corner to buy a newspaper. She had no watch, but she was sure that it was still too early for the call on her family, if she were to adhere strictly to her plan. She decided, therefore, to stop for the required length of time at a café some distance ahead. With the paper in her hand, and striking it every so often against her thigh, she walked slowly along at her usual majestic, statuesque, but somewhat negligent stride, following the crowd that was moving in her direction. She would stop now and then before some lighted shop window, pretending to be interested in the wares on display, but in reality conscious only of the glare of the lights. On reaching the café she noted from a clock hanging on the wall that the hour was much later than she thought. She did not go in, therefore, but hurried to the curb and motioned to a taxicab. In less than five minutes she had alighted on the sidewalk in front of the building where the Malacridas lived.

More than six years had passed since her last walk up that bleak winding stair shaft. Nothing had changed in the interval. She remembered the plain iron balustrade so unpleasant to the touch, the echoing landings with the spittoons in the corners, the name plates on the black-painted doors, the dim, indirect lighting, the musty smell of an ill-kept hallway in a cheap rooming house. But that was not all. At a certain point, just above the grey, brightly varnished sheathing on the wall, she noted an obscene expression that had been written there, either in pencil or in shoe-blacking, in her day. It should long since have been cleaned away, yet there it was, still black and distinct, as though not one of those many years had passed. But what impressed her most deeply was a sudden realization that she had not changed herself. "All this time has gone by to no purpose," she reflected, as she leaned over the banister and looked down into the dimly lighted rectangular shaft. "All that I have done during these years has come to nothing. I might have left home yesterday. My life has not progressed. Here I am, without money, without love, without friends, without resources—the same person I was six years ago."

She saw the hand and hat of another visitor rapidly ascending the many-angled and often broken spiral of the balustrade beneath her. She straightened up, ran up the remaining flight of stairs, and pushed the bell of her father's apartment.

Little Maddalena opened the door almost at once. She did not recognize Andreina. After considering her for a moment she seemed to conclude the caller was too fashionably dressed to be a friend of the family; or she may have mistaken her for the marchesa. At any rate she answered, positively:

"Signor Stefano is not at home."

And she started to close the door.

Stefano's name, pronounced at just that moment and by those childish lips, made the greatest impression on Andreina. Through her mind flashed the wholly fantastic notion that the family knew all about everything and that the innocent declaration meant: "Your lover is not here—go away!" A trace of her old sense of responsibility as a member of the family stirred for a second deep down in her. Dumbfounded, she gazed at the child with questioning eyes. But that was only for a second. An exact sense of realities at once returning, she pushed the door wide open and stepped into the corridor.

"I don't want to see Signor Stefano," she said, looking at the child without interest. "I want to see the others."

Without taking her eyes off the unwelcome lady, the child waited somewhat reluctantly to close the door behind her.

As had been the case six years before, the corridor was packed and littered with all the cast-off articles in the house, and still, as then, there seemed to be no way of lighting it adequately. Halfway along, a door was open and through it came a strong light and sounds of voices. Hesitant, troubled, Andreina went to that door.

The room into which it opened was the largest in the apartment and served both as parlour and dining-room. It contained a large round table that Carlino had cut, scratched, and ruined with his jack-knife as a little boy; a sideboard with a glass door, filled with china and glassware; a sofa, and two upholstered armchairs with fringed towels covering the backs. A second sideboard, open, had a marble top on which rested a china fruit dish with a single orange in it. In a corner stood an old-fashioned gramophone with an enamelled flower-shaped horn turned towards the room. These objects had all been there in Andreina's day. The only thing that had disappeared was the sewing-machine that had once filled the empty wall space between the two windows. The centre light, of the movable variety that could be raised and lowered on chains, with a brass weight for a balance, had been brought down almost to the level of the table. Around the latter, in one posture or another, sat the professor, Valentina, and Carlino.

Valentina and the father seemed quite satisfied, not to say pleased. Carlino, however, was sitting with his arms crossed and his head lowered. He was gazing fixedly at the circle of light that the lamp cast on the table-top and seemed to be in a despondent frame of mind.

Andreina stopped on the threshold, embarrassed. But the sight of her increased the satisfaction of the father and sister.

"Oh! See who's here!" cried Valentina, surprised, sincerely delighted, rising. "This is a day of surprises, I must say! First Carlino upsets the apple-cart. Now a visit from Andreina! But it's never two unless it's three! I'll bet that someone whom we have not in the least been expecting will still be turning up. I don't know—I have a feeling that something unusual is in the air today."

Happily laughing she circled the table and embraced her sister. Andreina submitted, pale, unresponsive.

By that time the professor too had risen to his feet.

"Glad to see you! Certainly glad to see you!" he mumbled timidly, wagging his head and pulling his red woollen vest down over his belt.

There was a moment of general stirring and confusion. Then all had found places about the table.

The professor spoke up at once, in a deferential, almost formal tone:

"We never take anything ourselves at this hour, Andreina, but I imagine you are accustomed to a little refreshment, in other words, to tea, as they say. I don't believe there's a bit of tea in the house, but Valentina can have coffee ready in no time, can't you, Valentina?"

Very tired, her eyes hurting from the too bright light, Andreina had dropped into a profound abstraction the moment she took her seat. She was startled and looked up.

"Oh—no!" she replied, hurriedly. "No, thanks—I don't care for anything."

"Now don't be on your manners with us!" cried Valentina, who felt none of her father's deference towards her sister. "You know it's no trouble to make a cup of coffee." As Andreina again waved a refusal, she added: "Perhaps you have been somewhere to tea!"

"Yes," said Andreina, quickly, taking advantage of the opening, "I have had tea."

A long silence followed. As had so often happened on evenings in her distant childhood, Andreina could hear the wind rattling the window sashes, and through the glass door of the sideboard, in which it was always kept, came the loud, distinct ticking of a cheap alarm clock.

Valentina was the first to start the conversation.

"You couldn't have come at a better moment," she spoke in a quiet tone. Hitching around sideways in her chair, she took up a little work-basket and began to unravel a bit of knitting that she had done. "As I said when you came in, it's a strange coincidence! For ten minutes we've been sitting here trying in every way we can to make Carlino tell us what happened to him, and he won't. According to me"—and she cast a glance at her young brother—"whatever has happened affects not so much him as someone he has a deep interest in. But we are deadlocked. See if you can get it out of him."

The evident allusion to Maria Luisa set Andreina's heart to beating violently. She turned towards her brother and looked at him. Thin-faced, wan, gloomy, Carlino kept his eyes lowered and seemed to be struggling with a strong inner reluctance to open up.

"I just won't talk!" he suddenly cried, his feelings getting the better of him. "Whatever I say, Valentina will answer with something mean!"

"I, mean?" echoed Valentina, barely looking up from her work, surprised, a little resentfully. "Look here, little man! Your adventures out in the great world must have gone to your head!"

"There, you see!" cried the boy, angrily, with a gesture that invited general confirmation.

Andreina perceived that Carlino's resentment was shot through with shame and bashful restraint, as though he would much have preferred to keep away from such a discussion but yet had felt unable not to provoke it.

"But come now!" she commented, forcefully. "Valentina said nothing unkind. Why won't you talk?"

The professor had been pretending to be absorbed with his newspaper. He intervened abruptly at that point, turning sharply upon his son:

"I can guarantee that Valentina had no remotest intention of hurting your feelings. But anyway"—he adopted his severe professorial manner—"I would have you note that, after all, I am your father and have the right, if not the duty, to know the whole story. I have refrained from questioning you. But don't imagine that you are so incomprehensible, so inaccessible to ordinary human beings, that no one can understand you. I was in love myself when I was a young man, and girls were in love with me. I know what such feelings are like and I respect them. Furthermore, I never betray confidences. No, sir! No one can ever accuse me of prying into other people's business or gossiping about other people." He paused, turned sharply away again, as though hurt or insulted, and reassumed his pretence of reading the paper. Finally he turned again and continued, on his dignity: "We are not interfering, Carlino. We are not trying to worm out of you things that you don't want to tell us. I merely say that in your place I should feel it wisest to tell my family what had actually happened to me, if only to receive from those who loved me the comfort, the help, and the advice that you seem to be needing now."

The oration appeared to have no great effect on the boy. Inattentive to his father, he had sat looking around the table, biting his lips, preoccupied with his own thoughts.

Suddenly he lifted a flushed, ashamed face into the circle of light and began to speak with a hasty, uneven voice, evidently trying to say as little as possible and still get the business off his chest:

"Well—if you must know—Maria Luisa—she's the person who—well, she's the sister of Signor Davico, well—she told me today that I mustn't go and see her again, ever! That's what's happened." And he added angrily: "Now I suppose you're satisfied. You have got what you wanted."

"In two words, she has shown you the door!" said Valentina, quietly, without looking up from her work. There was a thoughtful satisfaction in her tone, as though she liked what she had heard but at the same time realized its seriousness. "Well, you wouldn't believe me when I told you that she was a heartless creature, that she would have her fun with you and then toss you aside like a squeezed lemon. You see now that I was right. Well, better so! Only"—she looked up and fixed her eyes on Carlino—"only I can't help pointing out that if you had listened to me, if you had not thrown yourself in such a foolhardy way into that business, you wouldn't feel so disappointed now, and, more important still, you would have gotten along better at school and not now find yourself in danger of having to do this year's work over again. Oh, yes, of course! One listens to everybody, one believes everybody, except the people in one's own family, who are the ones who really have your interest at heart. So you have bumped head first into a closed door. Well, never mind! It may help you to be wiser some other time."

This discourse had been listened to by the brother with a manifest and irate impatience. Finally his wrath broke bounds.

"And you say you understand!" he cried in boyish fury. "Instead, you don't understand one blessed thing. It isn't true that Maria Luisa is a heartless creature. It isn't true that she has thrown me away like a squeezed lemon, the way you say. It isn't true that she doesn't love me. The truth is something different—oh—very different!"

Valentina may have overdone on the side of tranquillity.

"Well, let's have it then—your famous truth."

Carlino was embarrassed, sorrowful. He spoke in a hushed, low tone:

"It's something quite different. It seems that the husband is the one who has all the money, and since she left him he hasn't been giving her a penny. Now all she had with her she has spent and so finds herself obliged to go back to him and not see me any more. She told me that she loved me and would always love me." His voice broke at that point. As he looked up into the light of the lamp, they all could see that tears were gushing from his dazzled eyes and finding their way down over his cheeks. "And so," he concluded, with a quiver of rage in his voice, "I refuse to permit anyone to speak unfavourably of her. You will never realize what she has meant to me and how much gratitude I owe her."

That heartfelt declaration did not have the effect he had foreseen. He had thought that Valentina would be silenced and give in. Instead, he saw her look up from her work, glance significantly, half amused, half mocking, into her sister's indifferent eyes, and finally break out into a laugh.

"But might one know who told you all those fairy stories?"

"What do you mean?" returned Carlino, not knowing whether he was angry or surprised. "What stories are you talking about?"

Valentina bent low over her knitting and caught up one or two stitches that she had dropped during her hearty laugh.

"Why, it's all purest fiction—all that about her being poor, about her husband's having all the money, and so on. I knew that woman was fooling you, but I never thought she would stoop to actual lies."

Carlino blinked into the light, astounded. He had ceased weeping and the tears that streaked his thin, pale cheeks had dried.

"Why?" he stammered, faintly. "Isn't she poor?"

"Of course she isn't!" laughed Valentina. "She's the one who has the money, not the husband. He's a poor devil who might be able to pay his own board, and then again he mightn't. He has a title, that's true. That's why she married him. But money? No! If you don't believe me, ask Andreina. She knows those people."

Carlino preferred not to question his sister's assertions. The ironical, triumphant tone in which she made them had too far convinced him. He thought he would argue back, however.

"But Signor Davico is poor!"

"What's that got to do with it?" returned Valentina, quietly. "He is poor, and his sister was poor to begin with. She has been married twice. The first time she married a rich man, who died and left her his money. That's why she is rich now."

There was a fairly long silence. Then Carlino ventured again, with a breaking voice:

"Why is she going back to her husband then?"

Valentina shrugged her shoulders.

"That I couldn't say."

Andreina had been sitting motionless and in silence, with her eyes resting on the table. She seemed to be absorbed in something far removed from the topic of conversation. But at that point she intervened most unexpectedly:

"She's a snob with social ambitions—that's why she's going back to her husband." After a moment she added, calm, frigid, furious: "She's a rat, a plain ordinary rat—that Maria Luisa of yours!"

The insulting epithet startled Carlino, leaving him too puzzled, too painfully overborne, to answer. But the girl's vehemence had surprised the father too. He laid his paper aside and, turning upon his daughter a bearded face that shone bright in the lamplight, he sat and looked at her in stunned perplexity. Valentina alone held her poise. Reflecting a moment she commented, in the same quiet manner:

"Yes, to be sure. He's a nobleman. Without him she has no place in society. People won't invite her. But then again, she may have been lying even about that. Perhaps she wants to get rid of you simply because she has found another lover of her own set."

Distressed enough at having lost the woman he adored, Carlino now had the added and greater torture of suspicion, disappointment, disgust. The idol he had made of Maria Luisa was crumbling and falling to bits! They all could insult the lady of his dreams and he was powerless to refute them. His great love was turning into one great pain.

"No—not that!" he managed to protest. "I know she was going back to her husband, because she telephoned him that she was—in my presence. Tonight there's a big party—I forget just where. She made the call in order to ask her husband to take her to it. By this time she has left the villa."

After her brief explosion Andreina had relapsed into her blank, inert absorption. But her brother's last words sent a shock through her whole body.

"What do you mean—she has left the villa!" she cried, in a loud, wild voice. Her heart all but stopped beating and she paled as though she were about to faint. Far away in her empty brain she seemed to hear the deadly sentence echoing: "She has left the villa! She has left the villa!"

So—all her plans were going wrong! Maria Luisa had left the villa and no one had thought of detaining her! She had vanished like a perverse, elusive ghost, after luring her, Andreina, into a blind road, a dead end, that had no point of issue! "She has left the villa!" she again shrieked inwardly, and the inner cry seemed to seek gestures to express itself. She was tempted to pull at her own hair, wring her hands, scream, so bitter, so torturing, was her overwhelming disappointment. "Maria Luisa has left the villa! So, all has come to nothing!"

But her strange cry had caught Valentina's attention. She looked at Andreina apprehensively.

"You are pale, dear!" she said. "You are not feeling well? You *are* pale, aren't you!"

Andreina forced a smile.

"I was a little dizzy. But it's nothing." And turning to Carlino she continued: "So, then—by this time, Maria Luisa has left home for the party?"

"Well, now, really," the boy answered, sad, embarrassed, "I couldn't say just that. When I left, she was dressing for the party, and I heard her make an appointment with her husband for about eight. That's all I know. . . . So now," he concluded, lowering his head again, "it's all over! You can all be satisfied!"

"Thank Heaven it's over!" said Valentina, dryly, without looking up from her knitting. She knitted two or three rows; then she laid her needles aside on the table, turned towards her brother, and looked at him solemnly. "So now that everything is over, tell me yourself whether it would not have been better for you to follow my advice, and not let yourself fall into the clutches of that woman. If you had listened to me, you would not have fallen so far behind in your studies, and, more too, you wouldn't be going around with that ghost's face of yours that makes you look as though you had been through a racking illness. Lots of good it did you to fall in love with a woman like that! And one year from graduation—less than a year! Oh, Carlino!" And she laid her white delicate hand on her spacious bosom, the lids winked pathetically up and down over her large round birdlike eyes, her voice shook. "Didn't I tell you over and over again: 'Look out for that woman!'? But it was like talking to the wind! And what has come of it all? For her you were just a pastime, a toy. When she got tired of playing with you, she threw you away. For that matter, what else could she have done? She is a society lady with lots of money and no heart. She's bored—she doesn't know what to do with herself. You're just a child, a schoolboy, just the son of a schoolteacher. Things could only end that way!"

The professor hitched nervously in his chair. He had been listening with his hand playing over his beard, heaving a sigh every so often from somewhere deep down in his chest. But Valentina's last remark stirred him.

"Now not so fast—just a moment! What do you mean—just the son of a schoolteacher? Just a moment, if you please! Though it's nothing much in appearances, my profession is far from being a contemptible one. Carlino can only be proud of being the son of a high-school teacher."

"Now, papa," the girl replied, quietly, fussing with the cord in her sleeve at her elbow. "You know perfectly well what I meant. I merely wanted to say that Carlino would have been wiser to remember that we are not rich, that we have no titles, that the gap between him and that woman was too wide. That's all I meant."

There was another silence. Carlino sat with lowered head, frowning, occasionally moving his lips as though he were chewing at something that had a bitter taste.

"I'm not going back to school!" he suddenly declared.

Valentina glanced at him over the top of the table.

"So you're not going back to school!" She was fairly calm. "Really! And what are you going to do?"

"That I don't know. I've lost interest in studying."

"Well," she answered, good-humouredly, with an indication that she could be cross if necessary, "I think you ought to begin studying again. In a home like this, in a situation such as ours, no one can afford the luxury of doing nothing. We are not millionaires. Some day you'll have to work and earn money."

There was silence again. Carlino kept his eyes fixed on the circle of light on the table, as though he were trying to hide his dark sorrowing expression from those about him. Actually he was going over in his mind the last episodes in his affair with the marchesa. Not being able to argue away the duplicity that had been revealed to him, he felt as though he were seeing two Maria Luisas: the one noble, generous, like his mother; the other selfish, treacherous, deceitful. The fact remained that she had belonged to him, and on the scales that seemed to balance painfully up and down in his brain, he thought her surrender far outweighed her deceit, or any other treachery that might come to his knowledge thereafter.

"I don't know what I shall do," he said finally, as the conclusion of a long, silent meditation. "I only know that whatever you may say of that woman, I shall always be immensely grateful to her."

He rose with an abrupt, awkwardly boyish movement, thrust his hands into his trouser pockets, went to the door, sent it flying open with a kick, and disappeared.

In the silence that returned the only sounds that were audible were the rush of the wind about the windows and the ticking of the clock in the closed sideboard.

"He's hurt," Valentina commented, very wise. "But it won't last long—he'll get over it. What there's no help for is the studying he has missed. He'll have to repeat the year." She paused for a moment, with a sigh. Then she resumed, changing the subject, gay, chatty: "But do you know, Andreina, you have surprised us! We hadn't been expecting a visit from you! It's a pleasure—and an honour!"

The same commotion that had attacked Andreina on her leave-taking at Pietro's again caught at her throat.

"If you only knew!" she cried, instinctively, yearning to confide. In the throb of feelings that were stirring in her heart, she found it hard to find words. Mastering herself she added quietly: "If you only knew why I have come, you would be still more surprised!"

The professor looked worried. He raised his eyes from his paper and glanced furtively at his daughter.

"You are trying to tease us!" said Valentina. "I thought you had come just for a visit—you know. . . ."

What Andreina intended to say she had thought up as a pretext long in advance, in order to account for an otherwise unexplainable attention to her family. But at that moment, in the state of mind she was in, it seemed more than a pretext arbitrarily invented. Something about it seemed to come from the bottom of her soul and quite against her will. With her pointed, red-painted fingernails playing among the cuts that her brother's knife had made long before in the soft, cheap wood of the table, she explained:

"I came to find out whether you could take me back here for a time, in case I need to go somewhere. I have only a little money left and I shall soon have to be moving from my apartment. I could stay here while I am hunting up a job or something. I wouldn't be any great burden. It would be a matter of a room and a bed. For that matter, there is nothing definite about it. I just wanted to know."

The question filled Valentina with unbounded happiness.

"Why, Andreina, of course!" she cried, warmly, laying her work aside, looking at her sister and smiling with a joyous astonishment. "Wouldn't we be happy to have you back with us again! I'm speaking for myself, to be sure. But papa is here. . . ."

The professor had been holding aloof, half in timidity, half in displeasure. At Valentina's appeal he gave a violent shrug of his shoulders, and interrupted, angrily:

"Now, Valentina, don't be silly. I needn't say that I should be happy to have Andreina come back and live with us. It goes without saying." But he added, with a certain mawkish formality: "Of course, she has been used to a different sort of style from what we have here. I don't know whether she can adapt herself to our plane of living. However that may be, she's welcome, of course—most welcome!"

But already Valentina, following the thread of her own thoughts, had stopped listening to him.

"There's one thing, though," she said, turning to her sister. "We just haven't a room that you could call your own. You'll have to sleep in the same room with me!"

"That would make no difference," Andreina answered, shrugging her shoulders with a bitter levity. "In my present circumstances . . ."

"But really, do you mean it?" asked Valentina, finding it hard to get used to the idea. "You really want to come?"

"Of course I mean it!" said the other, lifting a pair of grave, sparkling eyes upon her.

Valentina had picked up her work again. She laid it down once more on the table.

"I asked," she explained, "because, if you wish, we could take a look at the room now. That would enable you to see just how you will be fixed, in case you really should decide to come. Shall we go?"

And she rose to her feet.

"Let's!" answered Andreina.

She would not have confessed it to herself, but she had a keen and painful yearning again to see the room from which she had stolen, six years before, on tiptoe, at dawn, without regrets, without fear, her soul writhing in a mixture of hatreds, hopes, and greedy longings. Leaving the disconcerted professor alone at the big, bright, empty table, she rose in her turn and followed her sister out of the room.

"We ought really to give you Davico's room," said Valentina, picking her way past the obstructions in the corridor. "It seems that he is leaving us, thank Heaven, in a month or two. But you understand, with the few lessons papa manages to find at the private schools and my work at the clinic, we are barely able to make ends meet from month to month. When we can rent the room, it comes in mighty handy. . . ."

She broke off. Like a landlady showing her quarters to a prospective customer, she pushed open a door to the right of the corridor, just before Stefano's, and, stepping aside, allowed Andreina to enter first.

The room had only one window. Shut in, as it were blinded, by grey inner shades that were held together by an iron bar, it first struck the attention of one entering by the impression of loneliness and squalor that it gave. A lighted centre lamp hung from the ceiling at the end of its wire. There were two beds, one near the door, the other near the window. The other articles of furniture, in a dark, worm-eaten, unpolished wood, were cheap and much worn. But everything was in order—in fact a sort of over-neatness was evident everywhere. Clothes were hung up on their hangers. Toilet articles were in their proper places on the wash-stand. So were the few books on the table. Not a grain of dust was discernible on the red tiles on the floor, nor the slightest spot on the white walls. But the orderliness and the cleanliness were expended upon a very humble room, furnished with wretched, much-worn furniture. They seemed to intensify, rather than dispel, the first impression of nudity and squalor.

The bed near the door had always been Valentina's. Andreina remembered that she had passed the last night in her father's house in the bed near the window. She advanced towards it, calm, collected, looking slowly around her and savouring the fresh bitterness of the contrast between the smart gown she was then wearing and those miserable furnishings, between her present state of mind and the memories that the unchanged room awakened in her.

"This was my bed!" she said, without turning around. "Who has it now?"

"Maddalena," answered Valentina quickly. She seemed anxious to anticipate her sister's possible requirements. "But if you really come to live with us, it will be no trouble at all to fix up a bed for Maddalena in the dining-room. We have done it at other times. If you would prefer to be by yourself, we can arrange a portière around your bed. Then it will be as though I were not with you. I never use my bedroom except at night. Daytimes, if you want to write, for instance, or read, or just sleep, no one will disturb you. You can be as much to yourself as you would be in your own house."

But Andreina was not listening. She stood with lowered eyes and seemed to see herself as a little girl, lying on her back on that bed, with her eyes opened into the black night, her ears awake to the noises of the city, her mind filled with a maze of happy thoughts and imaginings. Often during winter nights the rain would beat incessantly upon the rattling slats of the blinds, while through the wall came the subdued, lulling gurgle of water in the gutterpipes. The wind too had a way of talking in a sort of lament as it beat in gusts against the closed sashes, making the rusty hinges on the outer blinds squeak and creak. At such times she had thought of her bed as an airy boat that had slipped its anchor but was still perfectly safe, and she imagined herself as drifting aloft over a great abyss with void all about her. Before going to sleep she would cuddle up under the clothes to linger in that sweet illusion.

Those had been the times of her wild and thoughtless innocence. And soon they had come to an end! Everything had changed with Stefano's appearance. No more slow and happy driftings to the shores of dreamland, but long anxious waitings —waitings till she could hear her sister's heavy breathing and be sure that she was asleep. Then, bare feet on the floor, hands stretched forward into the dark feeling the way, a few steps along the corridor, and Stefano! No longer attractive and boundless fancies, but a single goal for all her thoughts, an object at once loved and hated!

Those had been bitter times in which her eyes had been forced open to the realities of the world, when attraction had been stronger than repulsion, and every battle had ended in defeat. A trace of those days must still have survived on the wall just under the window. There, on one of those nights, during a violent access of revolt, she had scratched with a dry pen on the calcimine: "I must not go there!" But then she had awakened from a short sleep, and without hesitating, with no thought of the short sentence or of the resolve that had inspired it, she had leapt out of bed, fearful only of arriving too late at the assignation.

The memory roused an overweening curiosity in her. Lying on her elbow on the bed she examined the wall and there, sure enough, just under the window-sill, she had no difficulty in reading the five vain and ineffectual words. They were still intact, with the same ill-shaped letters that the dry pen had been able to scratch on the calcimine. Who could have said how many times Maddalena must have read them, fruitlessly wondering what they could mean! She contemplated them. She could not help feeling that a merciless fatality had guided events between that faraway night and her present situation, and again she felt the same wave of bitter, murky regret, of disconsolate self-commiseration. "Oh, the pity of it! The pity of it!" But that was only for a flash. "There I go again!" she admonished herself, angrily. And letting herself down lower on her elbow at a moment when Valentina was not looking, she scratched out one of the five words—the "not": "I must go there!" Then she shook her head as though to banish even a last trace of such annoying recollections.

Remoulding her face to its usual expression of cold resolve, she turned towards her sister again.

"Strange!" she said, with a forced smile. "It seems to me as though this bed had grown too short for me."

"It does?" replied Valentina with an answering smile. "Yet the last time you slept in it you were about as tall as you are now."

"I know—it was just an impression."

She rose from the bed and, lowering her head and pretending to suffocate a yawn, she left the room.

She did not return to the dining-room again, but walking rapidly past the door so that her father would not notice her, she made her way straight to the outside door at the end of the corridor.

"I must be going," she said in a half-whisper. She felt as she pronounced each word that to utter it had been like lifting a weight that was crushing her chest. "Say good-bye to the others for me."

"You are going? Already?"

Valentina seemed neither pained nor surprised at her sister's sudden departure, and that attitude, though she realized that it could not have been different, occasioned in Andreina a vague indefinite wonder. "And how do we stand about the room? You will come?"

"I'll let you know," answered Andreina, and with a pale, convulsive smile she stepped out through the door upon the landing in the stair shaft.

VI

DOWN in the street a stormy wind was blowing in her face, mixed, as she thought, with scattered drops of rain. The night was as dark and thick as the mouth of an extinguished furnace. The lamps on the sidewalk seemed to shed a faint inadequate light. Voices, rustlings, strange, incomprehensible words, seemed to crowd the vast upper darkness, as if two non-material armies were locked in violent combat and were struggling one with the other.

Andreina had walked only a few steps when she found a free taxicab that was waiting, almost as though she had ordered it, a short distance from the entranceway in front of a pharmacy with lighted show windows. As she climbed through the door she looked back at the store window. In it a large black snake was displayed, stuffed and coiled around an artificial tree trunk, with pyramids of bright, glistening bottles, all alike, piled high along the walls around it. She sank upon the cushions. The driver closed the door, returned to his seat, and started the car.

The mysteriously favourable influence that had had a free taxicab waiting for her only a few steps from her father's door, in a poorer quarter of the city where conveyances of that type were as a rule so rare, also seemed to be with her again on this drive home. The cab found clear streets ahead of it and sped like an arrow in an apparently blind but ever fortunate race. It traversed streets in a flash and rounded sharp corners at high speed without warnings from the horn. Around one of them the raised curb of a safety zone rose unexpectedly in the path of the speeding car, and the driver had no time to turn. He chose to take the obstruction head on, and the shock caused a violent jounce that threw

Andreina's head against the top of the car. Then with a graceful precision that seemed almost ironical the driver brought the cab to a sudden stop within a hair's breadth of the sidewalk on the river drive, in front of the gate to Andreina's garden.

Andreina got out, and as she paid her fare she remarked that the driver had a dark face with long moustaches and black, very shining eyes. "What if he were the devil himself?" she thought involuntarily, as she entered her garden, noisily closing the gate behind her.

The gravel crunched audibly under her feet. That, she reflected, was a noise that she should exaggerate just then and be careful to avoid later on, when she came out again. She entered the building and went straight to the janitor's room.

She was disappointed to find that the woman who usually attended the door was not there. In her place was a red-headed, freckle-faced little girl by the name of Ginetta, whose main function usually consisted of showing visitors how to open and close the automatic elevator. Nevertheless, Andreina put her head in through the door and asked:

"Has anyone come for me?"

"Not so far as I know," answered the girl, who sat holding a striped alley cat on her knees, with a book propped on top of the cat. "I haven't seen anyone."

Andreina opened the door wide and entered the room, looking around.

"Is that time right?" she asked, pointing to a clock that was hanging on the wall across the room.

The girl picked up her book, dropped the cat to the floor, and went and listened to the clock carefully.

"Yes, it's running. It seems to be all right," she said at last.

The girl had a shrill, high-pitched voice, with a rather vulgar cast to it. Andreina further noted that she was wearing woollen stockings fastened at different heights above her knees with strips of white cloth. Her skirt was too short.

"What are you reading?" Andreina suddenly asked.

Untalkative more from indifference than from bashfulness, the girl merely exhibited the book. It was a reader for one of the lower grades in school.

Thinking that she had attracted a sufficiently definite attention, Andreina handed the book back, pinched the child's cheek playfully, dropped a word of praise, and then crossed the hallway to her own door, being careful to close it noisily. "That ought to be enough!" she thought to herself.

Without turning on the light in the vestibule, she rapidly traversed the dark silent corridor, picking her way along with the assurance one has in one's own house. She entered her bedroom and turned on the light. Everything was in order. The bed had been made and had not been touched since. It did not show a wrinkle. That seemed to indicate that Stefano had gone out early and had not come back.

On the pillow, in conspicuous view, lay a letter. Andreina picked it up and tore it open hurriedly.

"I cannot stay with you," it read. "You are cruel. You torment me, and you do not pay me enough. I am leaving. Get someone else. Cecilia."

For a moment she stood there, thoughtful, with the sheet of paper in her hand, as though she found it hard to grasp the meaning of what she had read. Then, understanding, she said to herself: "All the better! Yes—all the better!" and dropping the letter to the floor she hurried to the bureau.

She opened a drawer, found a black, flat automatic revolver that was hidden among some articles of clothing and, looking the other way, dropped it into her handbag. From another drawer she took a heavy, black veil, and put it on over her hat so that it covered her face down as far as her nose.

Those activities restored her to a tranquillity so normal and so serene, that she was herself surprised at it. Calmly, as though following a routine, she opened the inner blinds on her window so that the light was plainly visible outside. Then she left the room without turning off the light.

Four tiny flames, white at the bottom, violet at the top, like the four petals of a cyclamen, marked the location of the stove in the unlighted kitchen. Taking her bearings from that incandescent flower Andreina tiptoed to the window and silently opened the two swinging frames. That morning, in the most natural manner in the world, she had set a medium-sized packing box on the ground outside under the window-sill. The sill was not very high to begin with. Sitting on it she could easily enough rest her feet on the box, draw the windows to behind her, and then, with a short step, reach the ground.

The wind was shaking the tall trees in the neighbouring gardens with a deep, intermittent roar, but her own little building seemed to rest in an area of impenetrable calm. The air in the garden was still and, as it were, shut in. Carefully avoiding the gravelled path by keeping to the cement border along the underpinning of the house, Andreina tiptoed to the garden gate. She had not made a sound, and still in the most complete silence she swung the gate and found herself on the river drive. No one was in sight on the avenue in either direction. She walked away at a leisurely gait towards the nearest bridge.

But only a few yards ahead of her, on the first corner, she saw a taxicab waiting, and it seemed to be free. "Lucky again!" she exclaimed to herself, greatly pleased. She ran, rather than hurried, to it. But as she climbed in and called the address, the driver turned, and a half-smile flitted across his face. "You made a very short call!" it seemed to say. She remembered the dark face, the two long moustaches, the black, shining eyes, that had given her such a superstitious fright a few moments before. Her blood ran cold. "I am lost!" she thought, as she sank back on the cushions, closing her eyes. But by that time it was too late to get out or to change her directions. The man was driving in the same skilful, daring, breath-taking manner as before, almost throwing her from her seat at the corners, and bringing her head up against the top of the car at every rough place in the pavement. The only hope she could see left was that, after setting her down once more, her accursed pursuer would disappear in the same mysterious manner in which he had twice placed himself across her path.

But her superstitious daze did not last very long. In the first place, she reflected, she had not given Maria Luisa's address but had named a street corner some distance away. Then, especially in view of her thick veil, it was by no means certain that the driver had recognized her as his earlier fare. The weird coincidence gradually faded from her mind, and she brought all her mental energies to concentrate on Maria Luisa.

As she thought of the hypocritical device by which her enemy had rid herself of Carlino, her hatred flared on high with a new violence, contemptuous, tenacious. "Indecent even in her love affairs!" she cried inwardly. "And they call such trash a human being! She thinks she is better than I am! She thinks she has a right to despise me!" Lights, buildings, crowded sidewalks flitted past the windows of the taxicab. She grated her teeth as she sat looking at them. Her hatred, based on a distorted sense of justice, reduced her to a sort of dazed stupefaction that lasted the whole length of the ride. She did not recover from it till she had left the cab, walked for some moments along the suburban avenue, and finally reached the head of the sloping shaded street on which Maria Luisa's villa was situated.

She recognized the gate some distance away, from the two white pilasters that rose distinctly between the trunks of two linden trees. She approached it, panting hard, as though the dark, damp street had been of a steeper grade and had been harder to climb than it actually was. The gate was open. She stepped into the garden.

In spite of the darkness she could not help being struck by the complete nudity of the enclosure within the villa walls. There were neither trees, nor shrubs, nor flowers, nor grass, nor gravelled paths! Just dark bare ground that had hardened in neglect and barrenness, and around that shadow-draped patch of soil, a low, light-coloured wall, the tall, pointed bars of the iron gate. The windows in the house, she noted, were all dark except for a small circular window on the ground floor that was intensely bright, and an ordinary window on the second floor. "Maria Luisa's room!" she concluded.

She circled the house and reached the little porte-cochère that sheltered the main entrance. There she opened her handbag, and in the light of the bulb that hung from the ceiling inside the porte-cochère she took out the diamond necklace and put it in a fold of her waist just above her belt.

She pushed the bell.

The door opened almost at once and Rosa stood there. A glance was enough to assure Andreina that the maid was in the same state of fright in which she had seen her that forenoon. "I must act quickly and not give her time to talk!" she reflected. That practical decision completely dispelled a ripple of nervousness that she had not been able to suppress entirely as the door opened.

"Is she still here?" she asked in a low, harsh whisper. "Has she gone out?"

"I wish I could say she had gone out!" the woman replied in a hollow, discouraged tone, looking into Andreina's eyes as though she hoped to find in them something different from the cold, resolute expression that was usually there.

Andreina pretended not to notice the imploring gaze and made no comment.

"No, she has not gone yet," the woman finally resumed, whispering, in short broken sentences. "She has dressed for the party. . . . She is still upstairs in her room . . . lying on the bed. I think she has really made up her mind not to come back here this time. . . . She told me to pack up my own things. . . . Just so you will know—she has ordered a car to be here an hour from now. . . ."

She might have gone on indefinitely with her broken, nervous chatter had not Andreina silenced her with a violent wave of the hand. Leading the way to the dining-room, Andreina opened the door and turned on the light. Before her she saw the large round table, of light, polished wood, bright now with a circle of radiance that streamed from the low-hung lamp.

She turned towards the woman and beckoned to her to come nearer.

"I'll station myself here," she said, quietly, hard, pointing to the table. "You go and call her. Tell her someone wants to see her on a matter of importance. You can even mention my name."

The terrified woman looked at her and did not move.

"What if she asks me why you have come?" she finally asked.

"Tell her the truth!" answered Andreina, losing her temper. "Tell her I have come to give her back the jewels that she lost. Now—move!"

And without giving the woman a chance to reply she pushed her out of the room and closed the door.

Left alone, Andreina stepped to the window, rested her hands on the window-sill, and gazed intently at the black shining panes. Her whole mind was concentrated on Rosa. She kept track of the seconds, wondering whether or not the woman had reached the head of the stairs, for she had figured that Maria Luisa's bedroom must be directly over the dining-room. She listened all ears to catch any sound from the floor above. But she had seen that the maid was thoroughly terrified and she feared that she might give everything away. "Instead of doing as I told her," she thought to herself, "she'll begin to talk, get mixed up, suddenly break down, tell everything, and beg for mercy. So—while I wait here, they will send for the police and have me taken care of." At the thought her fingers clutched instinctively at the sides of her handbag. Yes, the revolver was there . . . and so were the rings and bracelets!

She stood listening. She heard a door open and close upstairs. During her talk with Rosa she had raised the veil from her eyes. She now dropped it again and turned away from the window so as to face the room. She could feel her back pressing against the edge of the window-sill.

The door swung open and Maria Luisa stood on the threshold.

She was wearing the same flat-black, low-cut, close-fitting gown in which she had appeared on the evening of her first visit to her husband's house after their separation. She had hardly more than put it on when the strange visit of her rival had been announced. She had not begun to fix her hair or to rouge her cheeks. Without jewels on her hands or at her throat, in her natural unadorned complexion, with short, badly dyed, unpleasantly lustreless hair in disarray, she struck Andreina as having aged greatly since the time of their first and only meeting two months before.

The doorway was dark. Standing erect with a suspicious, ill-humoured expression on her face, with one of her broad plump arms lifted as high as the doorknob and the other hanging loosely at her side, she looked at her caller for a moment, then turned in order to close the door.

The movement enabled Andreina to see an expanse of back, naked to the girdle, and of a flabby, pasty, unpleasant whiteness. Wherever loose areas in the dress allowed, her flesh bulged out in taut, rounded cushions. It was all the vision of a second, but that brief glimpse of mawkish, pretentiously worldly nudity was enough to double Andreina's hate and add to her other motives of disgust an acutely physical animosity.

"You could not have been so sure that I would receive you!" Maria Luisa began, slowly advancing towards the table. Her voice had an intonation of contempt and haughtiness but it showed some lack of self-confidence. "You and I can have nothing in common. What do you want?"

The question told Andreina that Rosa had not mentioned the jewels. In her turn she advanced towards the table, and stood motionless for a time looking at her enemy. The lamp, with its shade of white frosted glass, hung between them at a somewhat lower level than the tops of their heads, so that the light played full on their chins and mouths but left their eyes and foreheads in shadow.

"We have nothing in common?" echoed Andreina, speaking in a slow, colourless voice, without lowering her eyes from the shadowed zone above the level of the lamp. "Can you be sure that the precise opposite is not the case?"

From the first Maria Luisa had concluded that her rival had come to talk with her about her husband in a last desperate effort to forestall a reconciliation. Andreina's question confirmed her in that suspicion.

"I can be very sure," she answered with a polite, conventional coldness, "at least so far as I myself am concerned. . . . It may be," she added, a light of exhilarated irony glittering in her proud, shifting eyes, "it may be that you were assuming that certain relations of yours with persons of our common acquaintance might interest me in one way or another. In that case you are mistaken. Anything there may have been or may still be between you and my husband does not interest me in any respect. Have I made myself clear?"

Those were categorical, utterly definite words, though the feeling behind them was far from being certain of itself. But standing there erect, motionless, hypnotized, Andreina seemed not to be listening.

She replied, however, after a moment:

"I did not come to talk to you about your husband."

"In that case, I repeat: What did you come for?"

And Maria Luisa assumed the gloating expression, the ironical demeanour, the impatient tone, of a person whose time is limited and valuable and who can see no reason for prolonging a manifestly useless interview.

But Andreina lowered her eyes and looked ostentatiously at the woman's gown.

"You were going out, were you not? To a party, I suppose."

"Why should I answer such questions?" replied Maria Luisa, with a toss of her head and a smile in which sweetness added flavour to vinegar. "I repeat once more: What do you want of me?"

Andreina slipped a hand into her waist, and it fell on the necklace.

"I don't want anything," she answered, softly. "But I heard you were going to a party. I thought you might like to wear this."

She drew the necklace forth, and allowed it to glitter in the lamplight. However, she seemed to retain possession of it with a certain restraint, neither laying it on the table nor handing it to Maria Luisa.

Andreina's movements had all been slow and calculated, and not once had she taken her motionless, gleaming eyes from the enemy before her. Maria Luisa was perplexed, disconcerted. She looked at that pair of fixed eyes, then at the table. Finally she perceived the diamonds that lay glistening between Andreina's outspread fingers. She gave a cry:

"My necklace!"

"As you see!" replied Andreina, and with a play of her fingers she allowed the gorgeous blaze of precious stones to kindle under the lamplight. "So I was the one who was right! We did have something in common after all!"

"My necklace!" Maria Luisa again murmured. And as she gazed at the flaming gems, her hand rose instinctively to her throat, as though she had just then become aware that she was not wearing them. But little by little her wonder gave way to reflection and reflection to wrath. She drew up to her full height, and her tone changed as she asked, towering, inquisitorial: "But you—however did you come by that necklace?"

"You have already guessed!" answered Andreina, without raising her voice, without lowering her eyes.

"You mean by that . . . ?"

"Yes, just so!" said Andreina, slowly. "You are thinking that I stole it. You are not only thinking that I stole it—you are hoping that I stole it. You are right. I did steal it. Since I can have no possible use for it, I am bringing it back to you."

"Give me that necklace!" cried Maria Luisa and, with an awkward, unmannerly violence that expressed both contempt and pride, she bent over the table and tore the necklace from Andreina's hands. Then strangely unnerved, strangely disconcerted, she stepped back, with her eyes lowered, her eyebrows arched, her wrists shaking. She kept tossing the precious object over and over in her hand. Really her bewilderment had been caused by Andreina's penetrating thrust: "You are hoping that I stole it." That phrase had hit the mark. She had been hoping just that. But for that very reason her proud and hesitant anger grew. What right had a thief, even a repentant thief, to practise an insolent psychology on her victim? A thief should show humility and fear. "I was not hoping," she finally lied, dry, haughty. "Whether you are the thief, or another person, is of no consequence to me. All I want is my property. Here is the necklace. But there were bracelets—rings. They were stolen at the same time. Where are they?"

They were in the handbag that the woman's rival was holding in her hand at the table there. But Andreina needed to provoke Maria Luisa to some overt threat that would oblige her, in a manner of self-defence, to resort to force, a resort she probably would never have found the courage to adopt on the mere basis of hatred, or on grounds of an abstract, arbitrary sense of fairness. She did not for a moment dream of taking the jewels from her bag and restoring them to their rightful owner.

"I haven't them," she lied, after a moment's thought. "I sold them."

Maria Luisa had been left surprised and in a measure disarmed before the incomprehensible strangeness of that voluntary restitution of the necklace. In spite of an instinctive, jealous reluctance, she had found herself admitting that, if the girl were to return the rings and bracelets too, she would have no sound reason for going farther with the case. But as Andreina had calculated, her answer gave fresh vigour to Maria Luisa's anger and spite. So, the marchesa reasoned, the girl was not the repentant sinner—that embarrassing creature who often hides a most irritating sense of superiority under appearances of contrition. She was the shrewd thief who did not stop at robbing her, but had now come to outwit her and gain immunity through a partial restitution that would leave her with very generous profits from her crime. The thought quite changed Maria Luisa's mental complexion. A first reluctant and obligatory inclination towards forgiveness now gave way to an aggressive desire to see justice take its course. Whetted, if anything, by the perplexity that had all along preceded it, a jealous hatred of her rival again took full possession of her. Her eyes blazed with an intoxicated, wholly physical malice. She would have Andreina arrested! She would see her walking in handcuffs between two officers of the law! She would see her pride humbled and her accursed beauty ruined! She would see her rot in prison, without clothes, jewels, powder, rouge! She would see her bearing a number in place of a name, and wearing striped prison garb in place of that smart gown that her own husband had bought with her money!

But Maria Luisa could not forget that she was a lady, nor could she altogether master a cruel impulse to play with her victim the way a cat plays with a mouse. She therefore sought calm, mannerly terms to express the proud, pugnacious resentment that was boiling in her soul. She spoke slowly, disgustedly, lowering her eyes, curling her nostrils, haughtily arching her brows, as though she were being forced to dip her hands into some revolting, loathsome substance:

"If you had returned all of my jewels, I might have been justified in overlooking everything and letting the matter drop. But you say you have sold them. In that case I must tell you that I have no intention of making you this new gift in addition to the many that my husband has bought for you with money of mine. Furthermore, I want my jewels back, if there is any possible way of recovering them. I therefore find myself obliged to do what anybody else in this world would do in my place: I must report you to the police."

She paused, lifted her eyes, and gazed coldly at Andreina.

"You have pronounced your own sentence!" thought the latter, but she allowed nothing of her inner state to transpire from her stolid face, which was now affecting an expression of mock alarm.

"Oh, don't have me arrested!" she pleaded, trying to give a tone of tearful entreaty to her voice. "You are so rich! What are a few rings to you?"

"A fine way to reason!" snickered Maria Luisa, scornfully. "If I were to follow the rule you propose, I would not be rich very long, I can tell you!"

"Don't call in the police!" begged Andreina again. "What will you gain by it? Nothing! For me it will mean ruin!"

In toying nervously with the necklace Maria Luisa dropped it to the table. The gems seemed to strike the wood with a grating, unpleasant, metallic sound.

"You should have thought of that sooner," she returned, sententiously. "How convenient it would be if we could do things in this world and then avoid the consequences! . . . You," she added, slowly, acidly, turning half-way around and looking towards the door, "you remind me of a maid I once had. I caught her stealing and she pleaded the very same way you have been pleading now. I forgave her—and what was the result? In a month's time she was at it again. Since then I have not been so easy to fool—I should say not!" And she shook her head with decision, self-approving.

There was a moment's silence. Then, speaking in a low, badly enunciating voice, Andreina repeated the same entreaty—and this time she really thought that she was finding the proper tone:

"For the love of God—don't have me arrested!"

Maria Luisa's rage was not blinding her to such a degree that she did not observe the extraordinary pallor on her rival's face, and the glint of fury in her flaming eyes. But she had seen beggars who allowed a certain threatening, browbeating insolence to lurk under their whining supplications. The thief's attitude, therefore, inspired her, not so much with fear, as with a violent aggressive antipathy. "What does this degenerate want of me!" she raged, furious, and she could hardly restrain herself from cuffing that annoying, insulting self-possession from the wench's brazen face, and that disquieting stare from her impudent eyes.

But chancing to glance at the necklace as it lay on the table, she suddenly thought of her appointment with her husband, and of the party she was to attend with him. She thought it was time to end a useless discussion already too long protracted with a significant demonstration of her loftiness as a lady of the great world.

"I beg you to press the point no farther," she said. "I am not in the habit of changing decisions that I have reached. In this case I should be less likely to than ever!" She picked up the necklace, examined the clasp, then fitted it around her neck with her two hands. "Besides," she added, "you have annoyed me. Go home now, and if you have any further explaining to do, do it to those whose business it is to listen to such things. I have nothing more to say to you."

Her last words had been pronounced under some distraction. With her head bent forward and her two hands fumbling at the back of her neck, she had been trying to snap the clasp and was not succeeding. Andreina stepped around the table and was at her rival's side.

"If you will allow me—I might help you!" she said.

But Maria Luisa saw in the offer an indirect effort at persuasion.

"It will do you no good to try to influence me!" she answered, with her head still bent forward, her fingers still working at the clasp. "I have told you what my attitude is. That is the end of it."

But Andreina was already behind her back and had her hands on the necklace. Stubborn in her impatience and bad humour, yet much as she would have yielded to a maid who was trying to mitigate a scolding by belated and unsolicited attentions, Maria Luisa straightened up, drew her head erect, rested her hands on the table, and gave the visitor her way.

"This clasp doesn't work very easily," remarked Andreina in a low voice.

Actually she had already closed the clasp but was lingering with her fingers on the diamonds and studying her enemy's smooth, close-shaven neck.

"Wait! . . ." she again said. "I almost have it!"

But at that moment, her last remnant of reluctance overcome, she threw her two hands forward and closed them with all her might about the woman's neck.

Maria Luisa's first movement was to fall backward, her knees bending and her hands grasping at the air. But on a second impulse she brought her hands to her throat and digging under Andreina's fingers managed to work her head around and force her assailant to break her grasp.

"Let go of me! You murderer! Help!" she shrieked. In her voice and movements there had been no less of fury, no less of hateful desperation, than in Andreina's attack. "Help! Help! . . . Rosa!"

The door swung open.

"Here I am, signora!" called the maid, running across the room.

"Hold her, Rosa!" she cried. "Help me hold her! She tried to murder me!"

She was struggling desperately, looking around with a distorted face, aggressive but worried.

Rosa ran behind her back, but instead of helping her, seized her by the two wrists and with a violent exertion forced her hands down and behind her back.

Maria Luisa then for the first time realized the mortal peril that confronted her.

"Help!" she cried again, backing furiously against the maid and twisting violently with her body.

That was her last effort and her last cry. Much sooner than Andreina had foreseen, her body relaxed.

Yet as the murderer stood there, with her hands pressing like a vise about her victim's throat, she could feel the body make a convulsive effort to gasp every now and again, and irritably she assured herself that she would never, never succeed in extinguishing the last signs of life. Then all movement suddenly ceased. The body slumped backwards. The maid had been holding the two wrists. She let go of them. The body slipped along the edge of the table to the floor. Blind with a vindictive fury, Andreina refused to release her clutch. Dragged almost off balance by the falling body, she still held on for a time bending from the waist, with her legs thrown wide apart. Finally she got down on her knees and for a long, long time, with her head bent low and all her body thrown forward over her clutching hands, she sustained her grasp on her victim's throat, determined to make absolutely certain that she was dead and had not merely lost consciousness.

Finally she rose, panting, pale, and stood in the lamplight.

"There! There wasn't much to it!" she said in a low sarcastic voice, catching her breath. "And you were afraid!" Her impulse was still further to vent her rage on her victim, but at the same time she was concerned to reassure her confederate. "You were afraid! But didn't I tell you that there was less to killing that mess of carrion than to killing a mad dog? She's dead! That means one rag less—and there you have the whole story! But she didn't want to die, she didn't! She wanted to go to her ball in her diamonds! Look!" With a laugh Andreina raised her hands into the lamplight. They were bleeding from the many deep scratches that covered them. "Those cuts are from her nails! Die? I should say not! She wanted to dance and have a good time—with me in jail!"

She forced another laugh, then lifted her left hand to her mouth to suck away the blood from a cut that was exceptionally deep and bleeding profusely. But she had not shifted her gaze from the maid's broad, ashen face, on which the lamplight was playing full. She saw her shake her head, slowly, gently, convulsively, back and forth, from left to right, while her eyes stared and one of her hands rose slowly and covered her mouth.

Some moments passed that way. Andreina continued sucking at her wound, but more to allow the maid to regain control of herself than because she really needed to stanch the flow of blood. But far from diminishing, as the silence in the room deepened, the woman's terror grew. Rosa kept looking from Andreina to the corpse, then from the corpse to Andreina. Suddenly through the fingers that covered her mouth came a long, low wail.

"Now what's getting into you!" scolded Andreina, in a voice as loud and forceful as she dared to make it.

"I'm afraid!" the woman gasped, and as though fearing that she might scream, she forced her fist half-way into her mouth. "I'm afraid!" she cried again, this time with a loud, frenzied voice, her eyes staring, her head rocking from side to side. "I'm afraid!"

Andreina could see that her confederate was about to desert and probably betray her out of sheer terror as had been the case earlier in the day. The present moment, however, was infinitely more dangerous than the other. Now on the spasmodic, uncontrollable impulses of an insane panic depended, not the success of a well-made plan, but the issue of life and death.

"Afraid!" she sneered, aloud, in a voice that rang with all the vindictive, contemptuous bravado that she could muster. "Afraid of what? Of that rag there?"

She drew back, and once, twice, three times, kicked the relaxed, inert form that lay half in the shadow under the table, half in the light. "Afraid of what?" she repeated, looking at the woman hatefully.

But the manœuvre had no effect.

"I don't know—I'm afraid!" cried Rosa, again aloud, and in the same frenzied tone. "I'm afraid!"

Then suddenly she put her two hands to her head, ran her fingers into her black dishevelled hair, and winding wisps of it around them, started pulling them out. It was a most unexpected development, and Andreina was taken aback by it.

There the short, sturdy, squatty woman stood, not once shifting her staring eyes from the pale, taut face of her companion, pulling out her own hair and wailing from time to time:

"I'm afraid!"

That insane and perhaps disastrous panic spurred Andreina to a cruel design that was not less bloodthirsty than her pursuit of

Maria Luisa. "I ought to kill the idiot!" she reflected, and she further saw that once the maid were dead, it would be possible so to set the scene of the crime as to suggest that the maid had first killed her mistress in order to get her diamonds, and then in fright taken her own life. But the urgency of the moment, along with a vague remnant of loyalty, prevented her from acting on the idea at once.

"What is getting into you?" she exclaimed in a forceful whisper, and moving a step forward she shook the woman by an arm, and so violently that Rosa suddenly ceased lamenting and pulling at her hair. Motionless, as though petrified, with dazed eyes, her mouth half open, with locks of long black oily hair dangling down her cheeks, she stared blankly at Andreina.

"What's getting into you? Come, get that necklace off her! If you do, it's yours!"

A new effort to reach the woman and stir her stunned sense of loyalty by an appeal to sordid greed. But Rosa merely stared, shaking her head, not uttering a word.

"Afraid again?" Contempt and energetic volition were going to Andreina's head like a too strong wine. "Perhaps you think I too am afraid! Look!" She bent over and started to get down on her knees beside the outstretched corpse. With her knees about to touch the floor, she peered with excited loathing eyes into the half-light below. Then, while one hand clung to the edge of the table for support, the other reached under the table towards the spot where the lifeless Maria Luisa upturned a blood-stained, diamond-covered throat.

But just then Andreina heard a patter of footsteps from feet that were hurrying across the dining-room floor. Taking advantage of her mistress's position, Rosa was trying to run away!

A raging dismay laid hold on Andreina, and again the wisdom of killing the maid and making it seem that she had killed Maria Luisa flashed across her mind. That would be the only trustworthy means of freeing herself for good and all of this only too human blackmail of terror and remorse! But she had to act at once. In a second she had leapt to her feet and seized her handbag that lay on the table. By that time Rosa had reached the dining-room door and had her hand on the knob.

"Where are you going?" Andreina demanded, imperious, furious.

The woman looked around and saw the revolver in Andreina's hand. She must have understood the danger that threatened her, for she crouched low to one side, threw the door open so violently that it crashed against the wall and then dashed madly out into the vestibule. Under the steady white glow of the lamp the revolver went off with a deafening report. A wail of terror answered from the hallway, and Andreina thought that she had hit her mark. But she was wrong. No sound of a falling body followed, no groaning as from a wound. What she heard was a hurried scamper of footsteps up the stairs. Unhurt, untouched, the woman had escaped and was taking refuge on the floor above.

For a second Andreina stood motionless, erect, against the table, the revolver in her hand. Across the lamplight that was now filling with a thick slowly drifting smoke, her eyes gazed at the door that had come to rest, half open. "I should not have fired so soon!" she reflected, angry, chagrined. "I should have lured her back and not shown my hand till I had her."

But if killing the maid had seemed wise at first, it now seemed necessary after that impulsive pistol shot. The woman was no longer a panic-stricken accomplice. She was a dangerous enemy who had to be suppressed at all costs!

Andreina hesitated only for an instant. She circled the table and left the room.

The stairway was dark. Without turning on a light, clinging to the banister with one hand and holding the revolver and the handbag in the other, Andreina climbed the first flight of stairs, then the second, and found herself in the upper hallway.

There too there was no light. The three doorways were just darker spots in a general darkness. The deep silence, the fact that she did not know the house, and her need of not going too far from the stairs, lest her accomplice seize a new opportunity to run away, held Andreina motionless and hesitant for a moment in the middle of the hallway.

She thought she saw an electric switch on one of the supports of the arch over the stairway. She went to it and pushed the button. The hallway flooded with light, but at the same moment she heard a door close behind her, while a key turned in a lock. In the dark the maid had been watching her through the opening of a door held slightly ajar. Fearing that she would be discovered now that the light had come on she had closed the door and locked herself into one of the three rooms.

That spelled complete disaster, and Andreina was aware of the fact at once. For a long moment she stood gazing at the door from which the sound of the grating lock had come, not knowing what to do or what to think. To fire blindly through the door in hopes of hitting the woman was absurd—Rosa had certainly put herself in a safe spot. To get into the room through another door would be dangerous. That would mean entering an adjoining room and leaving the stairway free. It was necessary, therefore, to put violence aside, find some shrewd means of inducing the fugitive to leave her refuge of her own accord. Once she was back in the open, the killing of her would be about the easiest thing that Andreina had essayed in the course of a hard day's work.

She forced an expression of sorrow and consternation, against the case that the maid might be watching her through some aperture. Then she approached the door and knocked twice, softly.

"Rosa," she called in a low voice. "Are you there?"

Her tone was appealing, affectionate, timorous, well designed to mislead. However, no reply came. Andreina bit her lips. Leaning forward a little toward the door and putting an apprehensive expression on her face, she begged again:

"Tell me, Rosa, please, are you in there? I was afraid you were hurt! Tell me you are all right, Rosa!"

That tearful appeal likewise had no result. Far from answering, the maid gave no sign whatever of life—no wail, no sigh, no movement. Had she not seen the door closing and heard the turning of a lock from that precise direction, Andreina might have believed that she had been mistaken and was talking at the wrong door.

After another moment's silence, she thought she would try again.

"Rosa, be a good girl! I know the shot must have frightened you. I didn't mean to shoot. It was an accident. Now I'm afraid you are hurt. Don't come out if you had rather not. Just tell me that you are all right, Rosa!"

Another silence, profound! Andreina's throat had gone dry. She could not imagine what to do next.

"Rosa, speak to me!" she again begged. "I tell you again: you need not be afraid. I fired without meaning to—that I swear. Besides, Rosa, we must think of getting away. Otherwise we'll be caught. Do you hear, Rosa? We've got to hurry. We have only a little time left, and there are many things to do."

As before, no reply came from the room. The appeal to affection and the urge of necessity had alike failed to touch the panic-stricken soul of her accomplice. Unable longer to contain her frenzy and likewise realizing that no deception, however well devised, would ever lure the woman from her hiding-place, Andreina threw all diplomacy aside.

"Open that door, you witch of a woman!" she shouted. "Do you hear me? Open it at once. If you don't—well, I'll open it for you!"

She rattled the doorknob, pounded on the door with her fist, kicked at it with her shoe.

A hundred extreme resorts were racing through her mind—breaking down the door, setting the house on fire—that, in fact, would not only be the end of the maid but also obliterate all traces of the crime—when, distinctly, at the outside door on the floor below, above the uproar of her threats and her poundings, she heard a bell ring.

VII

HER first impulse was to stand quiet and still, even to holding her breath. Someone had rung the bell, perhaps in response to her pounding and her shouted threats. Whoever it was, the unknown visitor must certainly have seen the lights through the frosted panes in the door and through the window curtains. The only thing to do, therefore, was to discourage him, convince him that, appearances to the contrary, the house was deserted, and so induce him to go away.

Following that idea, panting for breath in spite of herself, pressing the handbag and the pistol against her chest, resting her back against the door, Andreina waited for a long interval. Her heart was pounding with great, violent, irregular beats. Her fingers clutched the balustrade in grim dismay. In spite of the empty nocturnal silence that pervaded the house, she did not feel alone: she felt that she was being watched by three hostile presences—her confederate, hiding in the room there, the dead woman lying under the table in the dining-room, the unknown caller waiting under the porte-cochère, just beyond that outside door.

For the first, she could see a terrified face peering through spread fingers, strings of dishevelled hair falling over blanched cheeks, a cringing form huddled into a pitch-dark corner. She could not forget the long inert form of the second, lying half in darkness under the table, half in the white tranquil light that poured from the table lamp. The third had no face at all. He, therefore, was the most terrifying. And all three presences were leagued together in a tacit complicity. They stalked about her like silent, invisible hunters lurking in the bushes to surprise a suspicious animal that stood resolved to die fighting. In the profound silence that pervaded the house she could hear them whispering one to the other, co-ordinating their movements against her.

That interval could have lasted only for a few seconds. It seemed a long, long time to Andreina. Finally it was broken by another ring, louder, prolonged, insistent.

Even then she would have clung to her plan and not stirred, had a new fact not abruptly injected itself into the situation in such a way as to force her to a decisive resort. She suddenly heard a sound in the room where her confederate had taken refuge. It was the sound of a window that was being thrown hurriedly open by an impatient hand. The maid, evidently, had heard the bell, and in her state of terror, to hear the bell and remember that the window in that room looked out upon the entrance drive, and then to think of calling to the visitor for help the moment she saw him going away, would be one thing. "Curse the idiot!" raged Andreina mentally as she heard the window open. "Next she puts her head out, gives a yell, and all is over! That must be prevented at all costs!"

Her first thought was to shoot through the door. Then she changed her mind and dashed down the stairs.

She did not know very clearly just what she would do. She felt that she was already caught. She could see herself being sucked into the whirring cogs of a hostile machine of fatality that was independent of her, superior to her. Her usual powers of clear and rapid thinking had therefore failed. Now her one hope was the one chance in a million that the visitor might be Pietro. He might have grown worried at her failure to return and so have thought of coming to her rescue. "If it's Pietro," she concluded, with a desperate, angry futility, "he'll have to help me. . . . Otherwise, what is his accursed altruism good for!"

Reaching the lower floor she hesitated, peering cautiously out through the yellowish ground-glass panes in the door. Through those jaundiced lenses, which showed an outer world perpetually bathed in the improbable, catastrophic light of an iodine twilight, she could see the faint, uncertain outlines of the visitor. Who he was she could not guess. The one discernible fact was that he stood there bare-headed. About him to either hand she could see numbers of slender flickering ghosts hovering. She made them out at last. They were branches of the two bushes that stood to either side of the porte-cochère and were swaying and shaking in the stormy wind. "Only a miracle can save me now!" she thought, as she studied the vague outlines of the stranger; and with that realization she felt as though she were bidding an irrevocable farewell to all the hopes and ambitions of her mortal life.

It was therefore with a firm step and a resolute bearing that she approached the door, pushed the bolt, and opened. She hoped to find Pietro, or else, more desperately still, some stranger who would prove mortally providential.

To her utter astonishment Stefano stood before her.

As she had already determined in peering through the panes in the door, he was without a hat, and the same wind that was swaying the shrubs behind him was raising the short curly hair on his forehead. As she opened he had been smoothing his hair and moulding his features into an expression of cold, deferential politeness. The expression vanished when he saw who she was.

"What does this mean?" he exclaimed, and it was clear that he could not believe his eyes. "You? . . . Here? . . ."

Hatred, and a despondent fury, had hardened Andreina's pallid features instantaneously.

"Come in!" she ordered, in a low, violent tone.

Stefano obeyed. With a single swing on his crutches he reached the middle of the lower hall.

"I don't understand!" he began, panting from his effort, speaking rapidly, and meanwhile looking around. "I don't understand why you are here—and then why you told me all those lies this morning, about Maria Luisa's being sick and going to die. I have been to my room at your father's. Carlino told me that she had never dreamed of being sick and much less of dying. . . . What's the meaning of all those lies? . . . Why are you here?"

Andreina closed the door, dropping the small pistol as covertly as possible into her handbag. Then she turned with a sudden violence and holding her hands behind her back gazed at the invalid.

"Tell the truth," she said, in a low voice, intense. "You came to see just how matters stood with your sister, just to see who the liar was—and hoping that it might be Carlino and not I! Am I not right?"

Leaning heavily on his crutches, Stefano contemplated the girl's pale, anguished face. It was a long moment before he answered. The silence that reigned in his sister's house, Andreina's strange presence there, the varying stories about his sister's condition—everything filled him with an agonizing perplexity as though it were all against nature. He scented that something was going on to his damage. He could not imagine just what it might be.

"I came because I saw fit to," he answered at last, brutally. "Have done with your prattle now and tell me: Where is my sister?"

"Waiting for you!" Andreina answered quickly, looking him in the eye. "This way!" she added, walking rapidly before him towards the dining-room.

Astounded, suspicious, still not comprehending, Stefano followed with his immense, laboured strides. He saw Andreina enter the room, go on to the table, circle it half-way, draw up erect on the other side, and then, with one hand resting on the table, the other lifted as though to support her handbag under her arm, lower a frowning, contemptuous, loathing face, and point at something with her chin:

"There she is!"

It was a dry, spiteful phrase, and as she uttered it, her feet struck something under the table.

Stefano looked at her, suspecting the truth. With two furious lunges on his crutches, he reached the table himself. He looked down and saw his sister's body stretched on the floor.

For a long moment he stood there, motionless, bending over on his crutches, his eyes on the gruesome spectacle. He seemed hypnotized by what he saw. In reality he saw nothing. Petrified by an inner terror, he was hastily considering the best and readiest means of getting himself out of there.

"Who did this?" he asked, finally, without moving, without raising his head.

"I did it—you did it!" said Andreina quickly.

That was the very answer that Stefano had feared.

"You are mad!" he managed nevertheless to answer. As he spoke he still kept his eyes on his sister's form. He was still thinking of the best way of clearing his traces. "Where do I come in?"

"I did it—for you!" said Andreina, calm, motionless.

Should he get away at once, or should he force Andreina to give herself up? Such the two thoughts that were revolving in Stefano's obstinately lowered head like two heavy grinding millstones.

"For me?" he repeated, after a time, coming to himself, but still with a certain amount of absent-mindedness in his tone. "Did I ever tell you to kill my sister, you lying, criminal lunatic?"

"You suggested it!" said Andreina.

Stefano was not the man to feel remorse for indirect crimes, committed at a safe distance from him. He had already concluded that once he could succeed in separating his own conduct from Andreina's act, his sister's death would prove to be a very profitable stroke of luck. So, in an altogether natural manner, he was already mixing a moderate dose of unashamed rejoicing into a fright that chilled him to the bone. However, at just that moment, the fright was uppermost.

"Oh, so I suggested it!" he repeated, obviously with something else on his mind.

"You gave me to understand as much!" Andreina explained in a gruesomely chatty tone. "As late as this morning you gave me to understand that your sister's death would prove a very convenient thing for you. So, quite properly"—and she sketched a forced smile—"I made haste to satisfy you."

Stefano gazed dreamily at that white, smiling, convulsed face.

His thoughts were elsewhere. He was not listening. He did not even see the girl.

"I never suggested—I never gave you to understand—anything of this kind," he began, in a slow, sonorous voice, heaving a deep sigh, biting his lips, and sinking a red, congested face deep between shoulders that were thrust upwards by the crutches on which they rested. "I never desired my sister's death. We were not in agreement on many things, but I never ceased to have a sincere affection for her. The only person responsible for this crime, which fills me with horror, is you, and you will be punished for it. . . . Of course," he concluded, and in his manner of speaking there was a heavy brutish strain as though he had been climbing a flight of stairs that were too steep for him, "you will try to involve me and ruin me. But that will be a wasted effort—my innocence can be proved. I knew nothing about this crime in any way. I had no reason to complain of my sister—I never wanted to see her dead. When this terrible thing occurred I was in your home in company with your father, your sister, and your brother. I can prove all that because I have truth and justice on my side. You can prove nothing for you have nothing but lies on yours."

He paused, and with another sign turned his pained and frowning attention again upon the body that lay stretched on the floor.

He had spoken with unusual vigour, in a manner that was at once flowery and solemn. But it was less the manner of speaking than the character of the arguments that reduced Andreina to silence. Truly she thought she was dreaming, or rather, as happens in certain nightmares, she thought she was moving from one weird and depressing hallucination to a worse one. What had become of the Stefano whose clear-headed, merciless cynicism she had long admired? Perhaps he had never existed! At any rate the atrociously ideal picture that she had had of him had perforce to yield to another, alas only too true—a Stefano paralysed with fear and self-deceiving, a Stefano who was willing, if only he could save his blessed hide, to talk of affection, truth, justice, crime, proofs, lies! Of such a Stefano surely it would be childish to expect that help and that complicity that would be required to destroy all clues to the crime and eliminate an untrustworthy witness. Yes, the end had come!

"So," she asked, quietly, her face white, her eyes filled with hate, "you feel you are innocent?"

She saw him start thoughtfully, without lifting his fixed, staring eyes from the dead body before him.

"Innocent?" he repeated in a hollow voice. "What good does it do me to be innocent when I could have prevented this horrible thing by coming an hour earlier? Poor Maria Luisa! Poor girl!"

Andreina took her handbag from under her arm, opened it, and rummaged around inside in a motley collection of articles that included a handkerchief, the revolver, some money, and her vanity-case. Her hand came out with the two bracelets and the half-dozen rings that she had not delivered to Maria Luisa.

"This stuff belonged to her," she said, and she threw the gems upon the table. But despite her efforts to control herself, her hands were trembling so violently that two of the heavy rings, bristling with points, rolled across the bright polished wood of the table-top and fell without causing a sound upon the soft body that lay underneath. "For these things, and many others that I thought I was more worthy of than that rag on the floor there" —her voice quivered with hate—"I did what I did. You had better say that, when they ask you; for, really, all the other things you might say could only do you harm." She lifted a cold weird glance upon the cripple. "Now I am going. Good-bye, Stefano."

The spectacle of the lifeless body stretched out at his feet ended by half hypnotizing the cripple, and he stood there on his crutches, motionless, his head bent forward. But Andreina's farewell, and especially the firm, sorrowful tone in which she had proffered it, served to bring him back to reality, in other words, to his concern for himself. "That girl may commit suicide," he thought, rapidly, alarmed. "If she does, it's all over with me!"

Looking up, with that thought in his mind, his eyes rested on the jewels that lay glistening under the white light from the lamp, then they moved along to the handbag that Andreina had left open on the table. He spied the black barrel of the revolver protruding from under the cotton handkerchief that but ill-concealed it. "She has a gun!" he remarked to himself, convinced. "There's no doubt about it. She's going to kill herself!" Thinking on, he concluded that at whatever cost he had to get the weapon away from her and then by fair means or foul prevent her from leaving the scene of the crime.

"Very well," he said, approaching the table, and he was so busy with his new worry that he did not think to ask how the rings and bracelets had come into Andreina's possession. "I will take care of them, and at the proper time I shall deliver them to the proper person."

He bent forward on his crutches and extended his hand. Then he began to pick up the jewels, slowly, one by one, as one might pick up kernels of corn or other small fine objects. But gradually, gradually he edged his hand along toward the handbag and suddenly made a move to seize it. But in spite of her anguished state of mind, Andreina had been struck by his sudden change in tone and was watching him closely. She was in time to tear the bag from his grasp and thrust him back from the table.

For a moment they stood face to face, glaring at each other in hate.

"You will not leave this house!" declared Stefano finally, imperious, panting for breath, his face flushed. The push that she had given him had thrown his crutches askew. Labouredly he drew them into position again under his arms, and then swung around in front of her. "You are not to leave this house, do you hear? . . . And now give me that handbag!"

An expression of utter and inspired contempt replaced the glower of hate on Andreina's face.

"So I am not to leave this house!" she repeated slowly, provokingly. "Get out of my way, you cripple!"

And before he could draw back or get a hold on the table, she had charged him with a powerful lunge of her shoulder and side, and was away out of the room.

"Stop, you wretch!" he shouted after her.

But his crutches had gone flying. He was off balance. Vainly striving to right himself by clinging to the edge of the table he finally collapsed and fell heavily on his back with the corpse of his dead sister under him. For a moment he writhed there like a turtle, with his arms and legs gesturing frantically in the air. At last he was able to rest a shrinking, loathing hand on the corpse beneath him and lift himself up far enough to get a hand on the top of the table.

But just then he heard the outside door in the lower hallway close with a heavy echoing sound.

Andreina had fled.

VIII

OUTSIDE the house, the enclosure within the circuit wall, as dark and bleak as a tombless cemetery, was in a swirl of hungry wind that for lack of trees and shrubs to twist and bend was scratching like a restless dog at the formless mounds of earth that had once aspired to be flowerbeds. Though she was hurrying as fast as she could, Andreina looked up at the sky.

The same dry wind was blowing along the ground and seemed not to affect the upper regions of the air. Flashes of silent lightning, from a storm still distant, from time to time revealed threatening piles of cloud that hung over the trees in the gardens and over the roofs of the houses. Pitch-coloured, heaped one upon the other, the cloud piles looked like long ridges in a weird inverted landscape. They all had a tragic immobility. Yet visible along a clear but torn horizon at every flash were the black upthrust tops of trees in violent motion. Dry leaves from the previous autumn were blowing about, while branches were twisting and creaking under the blasts of the furious gale.

Her head lowered, pressing the handbag against her chest, Andreina circled the house, crossed the garden, drew the gate towards her, and started along the damp shaded street, downhill. Before setting out for Maria Luisa's she had decided to return home afterwards. Pietro would be waiting there. She still thought of going home, though more in mechanical obedience to a pre-established though now useless plan than because she felt any need of doing so. What difference did it make now where she went? Her structure of schemes had collapsed, and she was left with nothing but the old angry pride that had been its foundation and which, stronger and more virulent than ever, was now sweeping her irresistibly to an uttermost revolt.

"It's clear enough!" she thought, seething with hate. "Stefano was afraid I would kill myself. That's why he tried to get my revolver away from me. But he was wrong—oh, how wrong he was!"

She might have gone a dozen yards when a taxicab came along behind her, passed, and came to a stop some distance ahead, under the wildly swaying branches of a large tree at the gate of a villa. Andreina hurried towards it, thinking that she would take it the moment it had discharged its passenger.

The door opened and a lady got out. She was alone. Tall, lean, she had on an evening gown of flowered silk with a crimson velvet mantle and no hat. Her grey hair showed a greenish cast from remnants of old dyes. Her blue, hard, stationary eyes seemed to float on a sea of wrinkles. She had a big nose and a broad-cut mouth. Her long neck displayed all its cords under a reddened, much powdered, ageing skin.

Andreina came up and waited at the door of the taxicab, intending to get in as soon as the old lady had paid her fare. But she saw her stoop over and peer at the meter. Then she found a purse in her handbag, opened it, and, apparently after counting her change to see if any was missing, handed the driver a small bill. The driver looked at it and said that he had no change.

The old lady flew into a rage.

"You cannot have that much money! You drivers are all alike! You always say you have no change in order to keep money you have no right to!"

In scrupulous haste the driver proceeded to turn his pockets inside out in order to demonstrate that his opened palm contained all the change in his possession.

Even then the lady was not convinced. Inflexible, annoyed, she protested:

"But I simply can't! If you are an honest man you will admit that two lire is too large a tip."

She shook her head, while her eyes glittered with a determined, sorely tempted conviction, as though she were considering the chances of her paying nothing rather than too much.

Andreina lost patience. Gathering up from the bottom of her handbag the small amount of change required to satisfy the meter, she stepped forward, thrust it into the driver's hand, and said:

"I am in a hurry. Here is what the lady owes. Quick now, Lungotevere dei Gracchi, number 9!"

Indifferent to the angry astonishment of the old lady, she climbed into the taxicab, closing the door noisily behind her.

"Lungotevere dei Gracchi! All right!" repeated the driver, gaily, putting his motor into gear.

By that time the old lady had recovered her wits.

"Stop!" she cried, raising an arm and waving. She had had a sudden idea. "Stop! . . . If you don't, I'll report your number!"

To that the driver replied by politely touching his visor as he drove away.

During the ride in the taxicab Andreina's mind dwelt not on Maria Luisa, not on Stefano, not on what was about to happen, but on the stingy old lady who had not been able to resign herself to giving a two-lira tip. How strange, how bitterly ironical it was that after such terrible happenings she, Andreina, had been able to find the futile, the silly strength to do a noble deed! For surely she could call that a noble deed! Paying the taxi fare of a lady in an evening gown—with a mantle of crimson velvet? "Nothing but noble deeds today!" she reflected, leaning forward in her seat to gaze at the dark, wind-swept panorama of city streets. "A noble deed to pay that taxi fare! A noble deed to kill Maria Luisa! . . . Yes, both on a par! One as noble as the other—just about! Nothing but noble deeds!" And then it occurred to her that these ruminations were perhaps the most disconsolate that had ever passed through her head, more disconsolate, more distressing, by far, than any of the thoughts that had impelled her to the murder of her rival! For that matter, her inveterate rage had not subsided. She had only to think back over the happenings of recent months to assure herself anew and angrily that she had done, not a noble deed, but an act of plain ordinary justice.

But the cab was already in front of her gate. She opened her handbag in the light of the street lamp in order to pay her fare. Her eyes fell on her revolver. As she looked up she saw Pietro's shadow move swiftly and gaily across the window curtain in her sitting-room and finally disappear. Her hate and disappointment faded, giving ground before a deep sense of self-pity—not a warm, consoling pity, but a pity that was melancholy, cold, as motionless as a play of moonlight over the dark rushing surface of a river in flood. She seemed to look back over her whole life from the day of her birth down to that moment and to follow the destiny that had brought her across the years to that present disaster. But beyond that frigid, unflinching recognition of fact she could not go. Fair? Unfair? It had all been fair and unfair at the same time! Frowning, with a dry throat but also with dry eyes downcast, she opened the gate and walked through the garden. She did not look up till she stood before the door of her own apartment.

It was open and Pietro stood in the doorway. He welcomed her joyfully, and the moment she was inside he threw an arm tenderly about her waist and drew her to him.

"Well, how did things go?" he asked, unusually moved.

Soon he had his other arm about her too and could not have enough of her eyes as he gazed into them with a proud, pleased, perhaps self-satisfied smile. "How did things go?"

Pale as death, Andreina drew her head back a little.

"Things went all right," she answered in a low voice, considering her lover intently. "The proof is that I am back. . . . But what are we doing here?" she added. "Let's go into my room."

Pietro released her, somewhat puzzled by her pale face and her manner. He followed her along the corridor to the bedroom.

Andreina went straight to the bureau and stood erect in front of it. Watching herself in the inclined mirror, she slowly took off her hat and smoothed back her hair with her hands. Pietro had taken a chair near the window. He saw her bend forward, bring her face close up to the mirror, and then examine it with thoughtful attention, touching the corners of her mouth with the tips of her fingers. Finally she turned, walked in a leisurely manner to the bed, and sat down upon it, facing him.

There was silence for a time.

Finally she said, pretending half a yawn:

"I'm tired. I don't care much about talking. I'll lie down here. You come and sit near me and tell me all you wanted to say to me."

She drew her legs up on the bed and stretched out full length, lying on her back with a bent arm under her head and her eyes looking up at the ceiling.

More and more astonished at her demeanour, Pietro obeyed. He went to the bed and sat down beside her.

"But what happened?" he asked, bending over her. "What's the matter?"

The self-pity that had laid hold on Andreina as she got out of the taxicab had by now given ground before a dead, lucid tranquillity. For a moment she wondered whether she should tell Pietro all that had occurred. She decided not to.

"Nothing much happened," she answered, looking at the ceiling. "I gave the jewels back, as you told me to do. Maria Luisa was in evening dress on her way to a party. She put the necklace on at once. I helped her close the clasp. By now," she could not help adding, "her fun has begun."

"And then?" asked Pietro.

"Then nothing. I came here."

Leaning on the bed with a hand to either side of Andreina's body, Pietro studied the pale evasive face that lay before him. As earlier that day, when the girl had come to tell him that she had decided to restore the jewels, he could not understand why she seemed to be so far removed from the serene, self-confident happiness that he thought should result from an act involving such unusual and such unflinching moral courage. "I could understand," he thought, "if she were angry at me for urging her to do that—angry at herself for having obeyed—angry at Maria Luisa, who certainly treated her to plenty of sarcasm and not a few unpleasant remarks. For a proud creature such as she is, to give back jewels that she had stolen, and back to a former rival in love, must have cost her one terrible humiliation! But she doesn't seem to be angry. She seems distraught, despondent—unfeeling. That's what puzzles me."

However, he was not inclined to attach any particular importance to Andreina's outer symptoms. The important thing, he kept telling himself, was that she had made restitution and freed herself of a crushing slavery. The momentary strain over, she would perceive the immense significance of what she had done, as the first act inspired by their love, as the real beginning of their new life. As he sat looking at her with all those thoughts in his mind, he believed that he had never felt such a grateful and impassioned affection for her as at that moment when, at his suggestion and persuasion, she had left the old paths of despair and started out along new ones that he had tried so hard to mark out for her. That was a proof of love that brought her closer to him, and made her dearer to him, than any caress or any word of endearment could have done. Now, he thought, for the first time—and his eyes filled with tears, for his gratitude and his hope were not disjoined from an inexpressible and exultant bitterness that always lurks about anything that is laboriously achieved—now for the first time they were beginning really to belong to each other, really to constitute one single human unit. Now for the first time, he again said to himself, his spirit welling with hope, now for the first time would marrying her have a meaning; for they could go on from it, leaving old quarrels, old habits, old associates, old times, behind them, looking forward with a mighty hope deriving from their common experience to the most distant future, however hazardous.

Those were things that he had always thought, but never had they seemed to him so close to realization, so ready to pluck from the tree of destiny.

"Andreina, darling," he murmured, bending over and kissing her on her neck at a spot under her ear where he thought her skin was specially white and lovely. "I have so many, many things to say to you. But somehow I have a feeling that you don't care to hear them—you are so far away, so indifferent! . . ."

"By this time," Andreina was thinking, "that disgusting cripple is boosting himself along on his crutches towards a police station —or he might even be coming here!" She raised her head a little, forced a smile, and brushed a caress with her fingers over Pietro's proffered cheek.

"No, I'm not," she answered, letting her head fall to the pillow again. "I am not far away. I am listening. Only—I am deathly tired and don't care to talk myself. You do the talking. And first of all—what was it you wanted to say to me?"

"Oh, I don't know," answered Pietro, more puzzled than ever. "Things about you, about me, about the past, the future. . . ."

"The past—the future!" repeated Andreina, slowly, as though she could not grasp the meaning of the words. "Well—supposing you begin with the past—my past! What do you see in it?"

Pietro gave a silly, deprecatory snicker.

"What a way of talking!" he exclaimed. "The way you would to a palmist or a fortune-teller! And naturally, of course, I have forgotten what I ought to say! . . . What do I see in your past? I have it—a serious illness! Yes, I really believe it—I think of you as having been, in a way, ill."

"Ill!" repeated Andreina, and she rubbed a hand over her forehead. "Ill?"

"Well," continued Pietro, explaining, "partly through your own fault, partly through fault of others, your head was full of wrong ideas, so that you had a hankering for things that either came to lose all value or else had never had any. Will you have an example? With nothing very definite to do or live for, you insisted on thinking that marrying Matteo was the thing that would settle everything for you. Matteo meant money, society, a title, and you thought that money, society, a title, were the greatest things in the world and the only desirable ones. Well, the time came when you saw that you would never get those silly things. So then what did you do? You rushed off in precisely the opposite direction: you stole those jewels! Who knows to what lengths you might have gone had we not met and had I not loved you! You were ill, in a word. Now this act of restitution has cured you and you will stay cured for always."

He had spoken with sanguine assurance, not as though venturing a judgment on matters in controversy, but as though reading from an open book or describing a concrete object that lay before his eyes.

"Your feelings, though justifiable, were too violent," he resumed after a moment, somewhat disappointed at Andreina's failure to reply. "You may have thought you were controlling them by giving them any sort of order that came handy, turning them now towards this, now towards that specific objective. Actually they were controlling you, and the order you gave them was only an apparent one. Your intelligence was entirely under their sway. You may have thought you were doing everything lucidly and with a clear head, both when you betrayed Matteo and when you stole the jewels. But it was a deceptive lucidity, not very different from the rationality that lunatics sometimes have. And that's another reason why I said that you were ill. Fever sometimes results in states of abnormal, misleading clear-sightedness in which we imagine we are thinking straighter, more deeply, and more energetically than we usually do. We are ill all the same. When the fever is gone and we are well again, we perceive that we were not thinking at all but just raving."

Andreina sat up violently on the bed. Her face paled, and she looked frantically back and forth between Pietro and the bureau on which she had laid her handbag with the revolver.

"Didn't the doorbell ring?" she asked, in a half-whisper. And her eyes, head, and neck moved strangely, as though she were trying to swallow something that had caught in her throat.

"Why, no—nobody rang!" answered Pietro, astonished.

In spite of his assurance, Andreina was not satisfied. She sat for a time, listening. Finally she lay back on her pillow again.

"Well, so much for the past!" she said, letting her head fall over to one side, while an arm dangled loosely off the bed. "Now the future! How about the future?"

"Oh, there? There I see a marriage!" answered Pietro. "Our marriage!"

And he gazed, not without anxiety, at the turned, motionless face of his mistress, for never yet, no matter how hard he tried, had he been able to obtain her consent to an engagement.

But Andreina's eyes seemed to have strayed to the mirror on the bureau. She made no objection.

"And after that?" she murmured in a barely audible voice.

"Well, seeing a marriage for you is seeing something!" he answered. He had talked freely of the past. But the future, he thought, should be treated very simply in the coldest, most modest terms, either because he felt an instinctive reluctance to talking of something so hypothetical, or because he felt that his own confidence was so great as not to need any dressing of glowing words or enthusiastic eloquence. "Yes, a marriage is a whole lot." He took out his cigarette case and lighted a cigarette. "And I see some gradual changing in habits, in associations. . . . That too is something—a whole lot!" He rested the hand that held the cigarette on a knee and looked thoughtfully out of the window. "And it will be a lot to have children—if we have any. Not that I believe, notice, that such changes will bring you—what shall I say?—happiness, or even peace of mind. How can anything make you forget things that you will never forget? But they will force you to think of things quite different from the things that have been interesting you hitherto. And that will mean a whole, whole lot for you. I have always thought that the doing of ordinary things involved greater difficulties, and consequently was better for the soul, than the mere dreaming of grand ones. This time, I can assure you, I am convinced of it."

He had been speaking slowly, as though to himself, taking little rapid puffs at his cigarette, and wrinkling his forehead into an aloof, diffident expression. Actually he was very much moved and in a manner that was bitter and at the same time full of hope. He felt as though he were painfully tearing up each word from deep down in him, as though his words were strongly rooted in his innermost soul, the way certain humble and inconspicuous grasses have deeper and more clinging roots than far larger and more conspicuous plants. "As you see," he concluded —and just then he coughed from having swallowed some smoke the wrong way—"I am not promising much, if anything. More than that, I foresee even greater problems than those that we have been successfully solving. But you will have the same courage and the same trust—won't you, Andreina?"

A door out in the corridor began to open and shut, first with a number of short repeated sounds, then, after an interval, with a single and much louder bang. Andreina raised her head and listened. The door slammed again. She leapt to her feet.

"The kitchen window must have been left open," she said, pulling down her dress in front where it had worked upwards on her chest as she lay on the bed. "Cecilia left today. I'll have to go and attend to it myself."

Again puzzled, he could not have said why, Pietro followed her out of the room.

As Andreina had foreseen, they found the kitchen dark and the folding window wide open. Cold air was blowing in in gusts that seemed to bound from one tiled wall to the other and finally mingle in a strong, steady, frigid draught. The dark across the window-sill was absolute, impenetrable, as though out beyond there lay not an open unbounded night but another room that was close and stifling. Nothing could be seen outside. One could hear only the rapid metallic rush of wind in groaning branches and rustling leaves. It was as if someone were talking.

While Pietro went groping for the electric switch, Andreina, knowing her kitchen, crossed straight to the window and closed the two frames noisily. By that time Pietro had found the switch. The light came on.

It found them looking at each other from the spots where they stood, Pietro near the door, Andreina leaning against the window-sill.

"The future . . ." said Andreina, in a low voice. "The future . . ."

"Well?" prompted Pietro, astonished. "The future?"

She decided to finish:

"The future . . . will not be . . . anything like what you foresee."

"Why not?"

"They'll soon be coming to get me!" she replied, quietly.

A deadly anguish fell like a mighty block of stone upon Pietro's spirit. He had his hand on the door. He closed it violently and advanced upon her.

"I knew that you were keeping something from me!" he exclaimed nervously. "Now you will please let me have it—all of it! . . . What happened? . . . Maria Luisa sent for the police?"

"Maria Luisa cannot send for the police!" she answered.

With her back against the window-sill she had lowered her chin upon her chest and stood looking at her scratched hands.

"Why can't she?"

For the first time Pietro noticed the long red scratches that marred Andreina's hands.

"Stefano will send for the police," she answered, without looking up, sunk in deep thought. "He will tell them that I killed Maria Luisa! That is why he will have them arrest me. . . . For having freed the world of that rag," she added, after a moment's silence, "of that accursed rag."

She spoke in a monotonous, contemptuous, merciless tone.

But Pietro was not listening. "I killed Maria Luisa!" The confession boomed in his empty mind, and suddenly it was as though a mighty brutal hand had stripped him in a flash of all strength and understanding, leaving him impotent and naked before an irreparably maleficent reality. "Andreina has killed Maria Luisa!" he repeated to himself, and though it was to himself that he said it, it seemed to him that he was speaking in loud frenzied cries as in a nightmare. "I am powerless now! I cannot bring Maria Luisa to life again! I cannot turn the clock back again! I cannot undo a crime!"

But the horror that rooted him to the floor was not the horror at the crime but horror at his own sense of impotence. "Beyond thought! Beyond love! Beyond all human help! Disorder! Confusion! Night!" A sort of frenzy came over him.

"You did that?" he cried aloud, shuddering. He seized Andreina by an arm and shook her violently. "Truly now, Andreina! You did that?"

She turned and looked at him. Her eyes glittered with a cold proud light.

"Yes, I did it. I would do it again."

"But why—why!" And Pietro began again frenziedly to shake her.

"Because it was my right!" she answered with a sorrowful dignity, not lowering her eyes nor changing her tone of voice. "Was she a human being—that woman? Did she deserve to live? And now that she is dead, what is missing? A rag—just a worthless rag!"

Such an implacable hatred surviving beyond death gave Pietro a new sense of his own powerlessness.

"Don't! Don't!" he cried as though deafened, and he raised his hands above his head as though to close her mouth.

But Andreina had already relapsed into her former posture, with her head lowered and her chin resting on her chest.

"And now," he added, wringing his hands, and pacing wildly up and down the kitchen, "now what are we to do? There is nothing that can be done."

At those words Andreina raised her head and looked at him.

"Tell me the truth," she began, and there was a reproachful note in her monotonous, ragged tone. "Tell me the truth! You are thinking that the only way out for me now is for me to kill myself! The truth I want! That is what you are thinking! The truth is, you rather like the idea that I should make things easier for you by, as they say, executing sentence upon myself." She paused for a moment. Then she raised her voice. It was firm, uncanny. "But I have no intention of killing myself, not the remotest intention! I enjoy living! I am made for living. The one thing I want to do is live. And I am convinced, furthermore, that I deserve no punishment—at least none from my own hands. Kill myself after all the living I have done?" A dry smile gathered about her lips. "Why, to end the way Maria Luisa ended, while I am worth so much more than she ever was—well, that would be unfair, too, too unfair!"

The old tone! The old quarrel! But now Pietro was conscious of nothing except the realization of his impotence to correct an unhappiness that was so deadly and malignant. "Christ!" he prayed inwardly, gazing at the woman's white, unseeing, obstinate face. "Christ! Christ!" So he had prayed as a child when he had done some wrong thing that he judged irreparable and which seemed to paralyse any powers he may once have possessed. So now he would have liked to open his two arms wide towards heaven or fall to his knees there, on the red tiling of the kitchen floor.

"If you enjoyed living," he finally exclaimed, halting his frantic pacing, "why did you do what you did? It is something far worse than dying. . . . No one wants you to kill yourself," he added, with a sudden burst of anger. "But it would have been better had you never been born—oh, no doubt of it! Much better! . . . And to think . . . ! To think . . . ! Oh, everything was going so well! . . . And all that was asked of you was a little trust . . . just a little trust! . . ."

He wrung his hands, gazing at her with staring eyes.

She did not move.

"Trust . . ." she repeated, slowly. "Trust in what? In you?"

"Why, no!" he snapped, impatiently. "In yourself."

He saw her shake her head, slowly.

"I have always trusted in myself. It was because I trusted in myself that what has happened happened."

Pietro's rage flared high.

"Stealing, murdering!" he shouted the words. "That's your trust! That's what you call having confidence!"

He advanced upon her with clenched fists and talked into her face. She did not flinch, nor draw back.

"Yes, that's what I call having confidence!" she assented simply.

They looked at each other. Andreina's face filled Pietro with hate and love in equal proportions: with love, because he could not help realizing, with terror in his heart, that, in spite of all that had happened, those eyes, those lips, those cheeks, that hair, were the whole of all that he held dear in the world; with hate, because the unhappiness that seemed to be unsunderable from all that beauty was in fact its greatest charm, could only remind him bitterly of his helplessness and of the utter ruin of his hopes. The two feelings fought each other for a moment. He stood hesitant and still. Then with a flood of anguished regretfulness swirling through him, his hate prevailed.

"Oh, so that's it!" he answered, at last. "Well, then, suppose you tell me what you think of doing!"

He saw her head shake, as she retorted, quickly:

"Is that all you have to say to me?"

Her voice was firm, but already creeping into it was a suggestion of contempt that Pietro did not miss.

"What are you going . . . ?" he began.

But she cut him off:

"Is that the only help you can give me?"

"But what help, in God's name?" cried Pietro, desperate. He had not taken his eyes off her grave, beautiful face. The two feelings were still at bitter war within him. "What help are you talking about? With the jewels, yes—there was a way out! I could help! But, Andreina—now you have done a thing that makes all help impossible! For all of my love for you, I feel that you are lost, irremediably lost! . . ."

Andreina did not let him finish.

"Never mind worrying about my soul any longer," she said, and her voice took on a weirdly dignified tone. "I am not sorry for what I have done. I would not hesitate to do it over again. But now, this very evening, perhaps within minutes, they will be here to get me. What I want to know is—what shall I do? Shall I let them arrest me? Shall I try to get away? . . . I am tired!" she concluded, and her voice shook. "Unless you will come with me, rather than go away alone, I shall give myself up. At the worst, one prison is as good as another. There is as much freedom inside four walls as there is out. And the people who are in jail are certainly not any worse than those who walk the streets or come to see you in your own house. If you will come with me, we can go away together, and that will be a real proof of your love for me."

At those words Pietro felt a great chill start at his neck and throat and climb his cheeks to his forehead. In that commonplace proposal of a joint flight he recognized the old persistence with which Andreina had striven from the very beginning of their relationship to involve him in her doings and drag him into the night of a fatal complicity. First, seduction into a betrayal of Matteo and Sofia! Then stolen jewels, which she had thrust into his hands by force! And now, by luring him into flight with her, complicity after the fact in the murder of a rival! And always the same method of enticement too—the appeal to his love and to his generous sentiments! And on his refusal, there would be the same taunts—his hypocrisy, his selfishness, his cowardice!

A furious sense of revulsion suddenly swept over him, a feeling of cold rebellion against an insane woman who was not content with ruining herself but persisted—in deference to a hell-born instinct for converting people to her view of life—in trying to ruin him.

"Do not imagine that I shall ever run away with you!" he said in a loud, angry tone. "Don't even think of my doing such a thing!"

They looked at each other. A sarcastic smile curled about Andreina's lips.

"Oh," she said, slowly. "So that is the love you have for me!"

"My love!" he repeated after her, and his rage was all but strangling him. "My love! Tell me—where was your love when, instead of returning those jewels as I begged you to do, you killed that poor woman? Tell me—where was it? . . . I have made sacrifices for love of you. But for love of me, what have you ever done? You have done nothing, nothing, nothing! Not even things that would have been to your advantage, things that would have made you a different woman, and a better one! . . . Yes, because to have a little trust meant loving me," he added, reflecting, and his rage gave way to a bitter sorrow. Andreina, the murderer, vanished from before his eyes, and all that he could see was the faraway, inaccessible, unreachable Andreina whom he had loved and dreamed of redeeming. "It meant loving me. And you just couldn't do it! You never loved me!"

The sarcastic smile had lingered on Andreina's pale, full, oval face.

"You are right," she answered. "I never loved you. I never had any reason, therefore, to follow your advice. But you were the one who kept saying that you loved me. And you kept posing as the most generous and unselfish person in the world. So now, if you don't come away with me, if you let them arrest me, it will prove that you are just a coward!"

She pronounced the last words with cutting satisfaction, and this time there was no tremble in her voice, no sadness in the intrepid glitter in her eyes.

She moved away from the window and went to the door.

The same wind that Pietro could hear raging outside, bending the treetops under a mat of heavy, low-hanging cloud, seemed to carry every thought he had away on its howling wings.

"Stop!" he cried, but even as he called the word he realized again that there was nothing that he could do, that Andreina was truly, irretrievably lost. "Stop! Where are you going?" And as he shouted the command, again he realized that even if she were to obey there would be nothing that he could say to her, no hope that he could give her.

But at his second cry she did stop, on the threshold of the kitchen door. He ran to her and seized her violently by an arm.

"Where are you going?"

He panted the question.

"You know where I am going," she answered. "I am going to give myself up."

As she spoke she tried to pry his fingers loose from her arm.

"Don't go just now," he said.

He had a vague feeling that they ought to arrive at some understanding as to what they should do in view of oncoming events.

"Why?" she asked, surveying him. "Are you thinking of going away with me?"

"No, not that—" he began.

But he was not able to finish.

"Let go of me, hypocrite!" she shouted suddenly, in a terrible voice, and she struck him with all her might in the face.

Surprise, physical pain, the sudden shock, as though a lightning bolt delivered by the tempestuous sky had pierced the three floors of the house and exploded between him and Andreina, held him rooted for a long moment to the spot where he stood.

In a tempest, sometimes, one may see trees and plants and grass suddenly bend in a direction opposite to the one in which they have been inclined, while rain-drenched clouds begin to climb from the dark horizon toward the middle of the sky, and the whole storm changes complexion. So the furious gale that had swept Pietro's thoughts away now began to blow in an opposite direction.

At first it had seemed to him that he was entirely powerless to change Andreina's character and destiny, that nothing lay before her except long sterile years in a prison of stone and steel, whereafter, for the rest of her life, another prison of haughty pride would harbour her till the day of her death. But now her insult and the blow that she had struck seemed to have broken the enchantment that had paralysed his deeper hopefulness. Nothing now seemed to him irreparable, nothing impossible, if not to him, to a power that surrounded him and was again whispering in his heart: "Go away with her? Why not? If it can save her, change her, redeem her, why not? Imprisonment, without repentance, without hope—yes, there would be nothing beyond that! But if we can get away together, then everything may be possible! Religions wash away sins! Miracles unlock even the jaws of death! Repentance cancels the past! Hope creates the future! If flight can save her, change her, redeem her, why not go away with her?"

That rapid thought had been the matter of an instant—it was more like an illumination than a meditation. In a wave of sudden anguish he dashed out of the kitchen and called Andreina's name.

The light in her bedroom was still turned on. On the bureau lay her handbag, her hat, her gloves. But she was not there.

"Andreina, where are you?" he called.

He looked into the bathroom. It was empty and dark. He went back into the corridor.

It was then that he saw the red curtain across the door into the vestibule carried upwards on a draught of air. He understood at once that such a powerful blast could come only from an open outside door. So then, true to her word, Andreina had fled in order to give herself up!

A few seconds before, that certainty would have given him a definite relief as solving in the only manner possible a hopeless situation. Just then he found it unbearable. No, anything except prison! Anything except leaving her to herself!

He tore the curtain aside and ran to the outside door.

"Andreina!" he called.

He dashed on.

In the dark, cramped garden, the thick ivy that covered the circuit wall was in rustling motion, as though each of its tendrilled vines were a snake awakening from lethargy and wriggling and uncoiling under the shelter of the foliage. Higher up, the treetops that projected above the wall were writhing in the tempest with a loud inarticulate roar. Pietro ran along the crunching, slippery gravel path, reached the gate, opened it, and was out in the street.

The river drive was deserted to left and right. The grey shining asphalt stretched away as far as the eye could see between the row of buildings on the one hand and the parapet that marked the dark gulf of the river on the other. No cars, no pedestrians were in sight. The only signs of animation were the oscillations of light and shade on the pavement as the street lamps waved to and fro in the gusts of wind. The gale had doubled in violence. The whole night was quivering, creaking, echoing, like a vast empty room.

Baffled, incredulous, so sure was he that Andreina must be visible somewhere along the sidewalks, Pietro stood still for a moment and looked around.

"Andreina!" he called again, but now with a voice from which confidence was fading.

A side street turned off the avenue a short distance away. Andreina might have turned into that, just as he opened the gate. In that case she would be only a few yards beyond the corner. He ran in that direction, taking the wind full in the face. It filled his mouth, nostrils, and eyes and dishevelled his hair. Arriving at the corner he looked down the street. It was deserted to the very end. There it was cut off by a tall, rectangular building with many windows—a school or a convent. Crossing the width of the street the building stretched along another avenue parallel to the river drive. Many other cross-streets opened in between. It was futile to think of searching them.

He ran back to the gate as fast as he could. The lighted sidewalks were still deserted. But on the river side of the drive, at a point where the gloom was thickest, Pietro made out the figure of a man. He was standing with his back against the parapet.

As he ran towards him, Pietro perceived that he was a patrolman, perhaps the very one who had frightened him so terribly that night when he was about to throw Maria Luisa's jewel box into the river. He reached the officer's side, panting.

"Tell me, please!" he asked. "Did you see a woman leave that house?" And he pointed to the little iron gate that he had left open. "She was alone. She had no hat on and no coat! She was running."

"Alone . . . no hat . . . no coat . . ." repeated the officer, slowly.

"And running!" prompted Pietro, impatient.

The patrolman dropped his head, his dark face shaded by a visor. He thought carefully. Finally he shook his head.

"No—I saw no such woman!"

Silently Pietro turned away. He went and stood against the parapet, with his elbows resting on the stone top and his eyes gazing out into the night. There was a frequent play of lightning, but it was far away, without thunder, behind the hills that rose on the opposite shore. At each flash houses, cupolas, bell-towers, came into momentary view, and tall woods on the hill-tops reaching up into the blanket of driving cloud. The first drops of rain were beginning to fall, slanting in the disorderly blasts of the storm.

AGOSTINO

Translated from the Italian
by Beryl de Zoete

DURING those days of early summer Agostino and his mother used to go out every morning on a bathing raft. The first few times his mother had taken a boatman, but Agostino so plainly showed his annoyance at the man's presence that from then on the oars were entrusted to him. It gave him intense pleasure to row on that calm, transparent, early morning sea; and his mother sat facing him, as gay and serene as the sea and sky, and talked to him in a soft voice, just as if he had been a man instead of a thirteen-year-old boy. Agostino's mother was a tall, beautiful woman, still in her prime, and Agostino felt a sense of pride each time he set out with her on one of those morning expeditions. It seemed to him that all the bathers on the beach were watching them, admiring his mother and envying him. In the conviction that all eyes were upon them his voice sounded to him stronger than usual, and he felt as if all his movements had something symbolic about them, as if they were part of a play; as if he and his mother, instead of being on the beach, were on a stage, under the eager eyes of hundreds of spectators. Sometimes his mother would appear in a new dress, and he could not resist remarking on it aloud, in the secret hope that others would hear. Now and again she would send him to fetch something or other from the beach cabin, while she stood waiting for him by the boat. He would obey with a secret joy, happy if he could prolong their departure even by a few minutes. At last they would get on the raft, and Agostino would take the oars and row out to sea. But for quite a long time he would remain under the disturbing influence of his filial vanity. When they were some way from the shore his mother would tell him to stop rowing, put on her rubber bathing cap, take off her sandals and slip into the water. Agostino would follow her. They swam round and round the empty raft with its floating oars, talking gaily together, their voices ringing clear in the silence of the calm, sunlit sea. Sometimes his mother would point to a piece of cork bobbing up and down a short distance from them, and challenge him to race her to it. She gave him a few yards start, and they would swim as hard as they could toward the cork. Or they would have diving competitions from the platform of the raft, splashing up the pale, smooth water as they plunged in. Agostino would watch his mother's body sink down deeper and deeper through a froth of green bubbles; then suddenly he would dive in after her, eager to follow wherever she might go, even to the bottom of the sea. As he flung himself into the furrow his mother had made it seemed to him that even that cold, dense water must keep some trace of the passage of her beloved body. When their swim was over they would climb back onto the raft, and gazing all round her on the calm, luminous sea his mother would say: "How beautiful it is, isn't it?" Agostino made no reply, because he felt that his own enjoyment of the beauty of sea and sky was really due above all to his deep sense of union with his mother. Were it not for this intimacy, it sometimes entered his head to wonder what would remain of all that beauty. They would stay out a long time, drying themselves in the sun, which toward midday got hotter and hotter; then his mother, stretched out at full length on the platform between the two floats, with her long hair trailing in the water and her eyes closed, would fall into a doze, while Agostino would keep watch from his seat on the bench, his eyes fixed on his mother, and hardly breathing for fear of disturbing her slumber. Suddenly she would open her eyes and say what a delightful novelty it was to lie on one's back with one's eyes shut and to feel the water rocking underneath; or she would ask Agostino to pass her her cigarette case or, better still, to light one for her himself and give it to her. All of which he would do with fervent and tremulous care. While his mother smoked, Agostino would lean forward with his back to her, but with his head on one side so that he could watch the clouds of blue smoke which indicated the spot where his mother's head was resting, with her hair spread out round her on the water. Then, as she never could have enough of the sun, she would ask Agostino to row on and not turn round, while she would take off her brassière and let down her bathing suit so as to expose her whole body to the sunlight. Agostino would go on rowing, proud of her injunction not to look as if he were being allowed to take part in a ritual. And not only did he never dream of looking around, but he felt that her body, lying so close behind him, naked in the sun, was surrounded by a halo of mystery to which he owed the greatest reverence.

One morning his mother was sitting as usual under the great beach umbrella, with Agostino beside her on the sand, waiting for the moment of their daily row. Suddenly a tall shadow fell between him and the sun. He looked up and saw a dark, sunburnt young man shaking hands with his mother. He did not pay much attention to him, thinking it was one of his mother's casual acquaintances; he only drew back a little, waiting for the conversation to be over. But the young man did not accept the invitation to sit down; pointing to the white raft in which he had come, he invited the mother to go for a row. Agostino was sure his mother would refuse this invitation as she had many previous ones; so that his surprise was great when he saw her accept at once, and immediately begin to put her things together—her sandals, bathing cap and purse, and then get up from her chair. His mother had accepted the young man's invitation with exactly the same spontaneity and simple friendliness which she would have shown toward her son; and with a like simplicity she now turned to Agostino, who sat waiting with his head down, letting the sand trickle through his fingers, and told him to have a sun bath, for she was going out for a short turn in the boat and would be back soon. The young man, meanwhile, as if quite sure of himself, had gone off in the direction of the raft, while the woman walked submissively behind him with her usual calm, majestic gait. Her son, watching them, could not help saying to himself that the young man must now be feeling the same pride and vanity and excitement which he himself always felt when he set out in a boat with his mother. He watched her get onto the float: the young man leaned backward and pushed with his feet against the sandy bottom; then, with a few vigorous strokes, lifted the raft out of the shallow water near the shore. The young man was rowing now, and his mother sat facing him, holding onto the seat with both hands and apparently chatting with him. Gradually the raft grew smaller and smaller, till it entered the region of dazzling light which the sun shed on the surface of the water, and slowly became absorbed into it.

Left alone, Agostino stretched himself out in his mother's deck chair and with one arm behind his head lay gazing up at the sky, seemingly lost in reflection and indifferent to his surroundings. He felt that all the people on the beach must have noticed him going off every day with his mother, and therefore it could not have escaped them that today his mother had left him behind and gone off with the young man of the bathing raft. So he was determined to give no sign at all of the disappointment and disillusion which filled him with such bitterness. But however much he tried to adopt an air of calm composure, he felt at the same time that everyone must be noticing how forced and artificial his attitude was. What hurt him still more was not so much that his mother had preferred the young man's company to his as the alacrity with which she had accepted the invitation—almost as if she had anticipated it. It was as if she had decided beforehand not to lose any opportunity, and when one offered itself to accept it without hesitation. Apparently she had been bored all those times she had been alone with him on the raft, and had only gone with him for lack of something better to do. A memory came back to his mind that increased his discomfiture. It had happened at a dance to which he had been taken by his mother. A girl cousin was with them who, in despair at not being asked by anyone else, had consented to dance once or twice with him, though he was only a boy in short trousers. She had danced reluctantly and looked very cross and out of temper, and Agostino, though preoccupied with his own steps, was aware of her contemptuous and unflattering sentiments toward himself. He had, however, asked her for a third dance, and had been quite surprised to see her suddenly smile and leap from her chair, shaking out the folds of her dress with both hands. But instead of rushing into his arms she had turned her back on him and joined a young man who had motioned to her over Agostino's shoulder. The whole scene lasted only five seconds, and no one noticed anything except Agostino himself. But he felt utterly humiliated and was sure everyone had seen how he had been snubbed.

And now, after his mother had gone off with the young man, he compared the two happenings and found them identical. Like his cousin, his mother had only waited for an opportunity to abandon him. Like his cousin, and with the same exaggerated readiness, she had accepted the first offer that presented itself. And in each case it had been his fate to come tumbling down from an illusory height and to lie bruised and wounded at the bottom.

That day his mother stayed out for about two hours. From under his big umbrella he saw her step on to the shore, shake hands with the young man and move slowly off toward the beach cabin, stooping a little under the heat of the midday sun. The beach was deserted by now, and this was a relief to Agostino, who was always convinced that all eyes were fixed on them. "What have you been doing?" his mother asked casually. "I have had great fun," began Agostino, and he made up a story of how *he* had been bathing too with the boys from the next beach cabin. But his mother was not listening; she had hurried off to dress. Agostino decided that as soon as he saw the raft appear the next day he would make some excuse to leave so as not to suffer the indignity of being left behind again. But when the next day came he had just started away when he heard his mother calling him back. "Come along," she said, as she got up and collected her belongings, "we're going out to swim." Agostino followed her, thinking that she meant to dismiss the young man and go out alone with him. The young man was standing on the raft waiting for her. She greeted him and said simply: "I'm bringing my son, too." So Agostino, much as he disliked it, found himself sitting beside his mother facing the young man, who was rowing.

Agostino had always seen his mother in a certain light—calm, dignified and reserved. During this outing he was shocked to see the change which had taken place, not only in her manner of talking but, as it seemed, even in herself. One could scarcely believe she was the same person. They had hardly put out to sea before she made some stinging personal remark, quite lost on Agostino, which started a curious, private conversation. As far as he could make out it concerned a lady friend of the young man who had rejected his advances in favor of a rival. But this only led up to the real matter of their conversation, which seemed to be alternately insinuating, exacting, contemptuous and teasing. His mother appeared to be the more aggressive and the more susceptible of the two, for the young man contented himself with replying in a calm, ironical tone, as if he were quite sure of himself. At times his mother seemed displeased, even positively angry with the young man, and then Agostino was glad. But immediately after she would disappoint him by some flattering phrase which destroyed the illusion. Or in an offended voice she would address to the young man a string of mysterious reproaches. But instead of being offended, Agostino would see his face light up with an expression of fatuous vanity, and concluded that those reproaches were only a cover for some affectionate meaning which he was unable to fathom. As for himself, both his mother and the young man seemed to be unaware of his existence; he might as well not have been there, and his mother carried this obliviousness so far as to remind the young man that if she had gone out alone with him the day before, this was a mistake on her part which she did not intend to repeat. In the future she would bring her son with her. Agostino felt this to be decidedly insulting, as if he was something with no will of its own, merely an object to be disposed of as her caprice or convenience might see fit.

Only once did his mother seem aware of his presence, and that was when the young man, letting go the oars for a moment, leaned forward with an intensely malicious expression on his face and murmured something in an undertone which Agostino could not understand. His mother started, pretending to be terribly shocked, and cried out, pointing to Agostino sitting by her, "Let us at least spare this innocent!" Agostino trembled with rage at hearing himself called innocent, as if a dirty rag had been thrown at him which he could not avoid.

When they were some way out from shore, the young man suggested a swim to his companion. Agostino, who had often admired the ease and simplicity with which his mother slipped into the water, was painfully struck by all the unfamiliar movements she now put into that familiar action. The young man had time to dive in and come up again to the surface, while she still stood hesitating and dipping one toe after another into the water, apparently pretending to be timid or shy. She made a great fuss about going in, laughing and protesting and holding on to the seat with both hands, till at last she dropped in an almost indecent attitude over the side and let herself fall clumsily into the arms of her companion. They dived together and came up together to the surface. Agostino, huddled on the seat, saw his mother's smiling face quite close to the young man's grave, brown one, and it seemed to him that their cheeks touched. He could see their two bodies disporting themselves in the limpid water, their hips and legs touching, and looking as if they longed to interlace with each other. Agostino looked first at them and then at the distant shore, with a shameful sense of being in the way. Catching sight of his frowning face, his mother, who was having her second dip, called up to him: "Why are you so serious? Don't you see how lovely it is in here? Goodness! what a serious son I've got"; a remark which filled Agostino with a sense of shame and humiliation. He made no reply, and contented himself with looking elsewhere. The swim was a long one. His mother and her companion disported themselves in the water like two dolphins, and seemed to have forgotten him entirely. At last they got back onto the raft. The young man sprang on at one bound, and then leaned over the edge to assist his companion, who was calling him to help her get out of the water. Agostino saw how in raising her the young man gripped her brown flesh with his fingers, just where the arm is softest and biggest, between the shoulder and the armpit. Then she sat down beside Agostino, panting and laughing, and with her pointed nails held her wet suit away from her, so that it should not cling to her breasts. Agostino remembered that when they were alone his mother was strong enough to climb into the boat without anyone's aid, and attributed her appeal for help and her bodily postures, which seemed to draw attention to her feminine disabilities, to the new spirit which had already produced such unpleasant changes in her. Indeed, he could not help thinking that his mother, who was naturally a tall, dignified woman, resented her size as a positive drawback from which she would have liked to rid herself; and her dignity as a tiresome habit which she was trying to replace by a sort of tomboy gaucherie.

When they were both back on the raft, the return journey began. This time the oars were entrusted to Agostino, while the other two sat down on the platform which joined the two floats. He rowed gently in the burning sun, wondering constantly about the meaning of the sounds and laughter and movements of which he was conscious behind his back. From time to time his mother, as if suddenly aware of his presence, would reach up with one arm and try to stroke the back of his neck, or she would tickle him under the arm and ask if he were tired. "No, I am not tired," he replied. He heard the young man say laughingly: "Rowing's good for him," which made him plunge in the oar savagely. His mother was sitting with her head resting against his seat and her long legs stretched out; that he knew, but it seemed to him that she did not stay in that position; once, for instance, a short skirmish seemed to be going on; his mother made a stifled sound as is she were being suffocated and the raft lurched to one side. For a moment Agostino's cheek came into contact with his mother's body, which seemed vast to him—like the sky—and pulsing with a life over which she had no control. She stood with her legs apart, holding on to her son's shoulders, and said: "I will only sit down again if you promise to be good." "I promise," rejoined the young man with mock solemnity. She let herself down again awkwardly on to the platform, and it was then her body brushed her son's cheek. The moisture of her body confined in its wet bathing suit remained on his skin, but its heat seemed to overpower its dampness and though he felt a tormenting sense of uneasiness, even of repugnance, he persisted in not drying away the traces.

As they approached the shore the young man sprang lightly to the rower's seat and seized the oars, pushing Agostino away and forcing him to take the place left empty beside his mother. She put her arm round his waist and asked how he felt, and if he was happy. She herself seemed in the highest spirits, and began singing, another most unusual thing with her. She had a sweet voice, and put in some pathetic trills which made Agostino shiver. While she sang she continued to hold him close to her, wetting him with the water from her damp bathing suit, which seemed to exude a violent animal heat. And so they came in to the shore, the young man rowing, the woman singing and caressing her son, who submitted with a feeling of utter boredom; making up a picture which Agostino felt to be false, and contrived for appearance' sake.

Next day the young man appeared again. Agostino's mother insisted on her son coming and the scenes of the day before repeated themselves. Then after a few days' interval they went out again. And at last, with their apparently growing intimacy, he came to fetch her daily, and each time Agostino was obliged to go too, to listen to their conversation and to watch them bathing. He hated these expeditions, and invented a thousand reasons for not going. He would disappear and not show himself till his mother, having called him repeatedly and hunted for him everywhere, succeeded at last in unearthing him; but then he came less in response to her appeals than because her disappointment and vexation aroused his pity. He kept completely silent on the float, hoping they would understand and leave him alone, but in the end he proved weaker and more susceptible to pity than his mother or the young man. It was enough for them just to have him there; as for his feelings, he came to see that they counted for less than nothing. So, in spite of all his attempts to escape, the expeditions continued.

ONE day Agostino was sitting on the sand behind his mother's deck chair, waiting for the white raft to appear on the sea and for his mother to wave her hand in greeting and call to the young man by name. But the usual hour for his appearance passed, and his mother's disappointed and cross expression clearly showed that she had given up all hope of his coming. Agostino had often wondered what he should feel in such a case, and had supposed that his joy would have been at least as great as his mother's disappointment. But he was surprised to feel instead a vague disappointment, and he realized that the humiliations and resentments of those daily outings had become almost a necessity of life to him. Therefore, with a confused and unconscious desire to inflict pain on his mother, he asked her more than once if they were not going out for their usual row. She replied each time that she didn't know, but that probably they wouldn't be going today. She lay in the deck chair with a book open in her lap, but she wasn't reading and her eyes continually wandered out to sea, as if seeking some particular object among the many boats and bathers with which the water was already swarming. After sitting a long time behind his mother's chair, drawing patterns in the sand, Agostino came round to her and said in a tone of voice which he felt to be teasing and even mocking: "Mamma, do you mean to say that we're not going out on the raft today?" His mother may have felt the mockery in his voice and the desire to make her suffer, or his few rash words may have sufficed to release her long pent-up irritation. She raised her hand with an involuntary gesture and gave him a sharp slap on the cheek, which did not really hurt, probably because she regretted it almost before the blow fell. Agostino said nothing, but leaping up off the sand in one bound, he went away with his head hanging down, in the direction of the beach cabin. "Agostino! . . . Agostino! . . ." he heard his name called several times. Then the calling stopped, and looking back he fancied he saw among the throng of boats the young man's white raft. But he no longer worried about that, he was like someone who has found a treasure and hastens to hide it away so that he may examine it alone. For it was with just such a sense of discovery that he ran away to nurse his injury; something so novel to him as to seem almost incredible.

His cheek burned, his eyes were full of tears which he could not keep back; and fearing lest his sobs should break out before he got into shelter, he ran doubled up. The accumulated bitterness of all those days when he had been compelled to accompany the young man and his mother came surging back on him, and he felt that if only he could have a good cry it would release something in him and help him to understand the meaning of all these strange happenings. The simplest thing seemed to be to shut himself up in the beach cabin. His mother was probably already out in the boat and no one would disturb him. Agostino climbed the steps hurriedly, opened the door and, leaving it ajar, sat down on a stool in the corner.

He huddled up with his knees tucked into his chest and his head against the wall, and holding his face between his hands, started weeping conscientiously. The slap he had received kept rising up before him, and he wondered why, when it seemed so hard, his mother's hand had been so soft and irresolute. With the bitter sense of humiliation aroused in him by the blow were mixed a thousand other sensations, even more disagreeable, which had wounded his feelings during these last days. There was one above all which kept returning to his mind: the image of his mother's body in its damp tricot pressed against his cheek, quivering with a sort of imperious vitality. And just as great clouds of dust fly out from old clothes when they are beaten, so, as the result of that blow to his suffering and bewildered consciousness, there arose in him again the sensation of his mother's body pressed against his cheek. Indeed, that sensation seemed at times to take the place of the slap; at others, the two became so mixed that he felt both the throbbing of her body and the burning blow. But while it seemed to him natural that the slap on his cheek should keep flaring up like a fire which is gradually going out, he could not understand why the earlier sensation so persistently recurred. Why, among so many others, was it just that one which haunted him? He could not have explained it, but he thought that as long as he lived he would only have to carry his memory back to that moment in his life in order to have fresh against his cheek the pulse of her body and the rough texture of the damp tricot.

He went on crying softly to himself so as not to interrupt the painful workings of his memory, at the same time rubbing away from his wet skin with the tips of his fingers the tears which continued to fall slowly but uninterruptedly from his eyes. It was dark and stuffy in the cabin. Suddenly he had a feeling of someone opening the door, and he almost hoped that his mother, repenting of what she had done, would lay her hand affectionately on his shoulder and turn his face toward her. And his lips had already begun to shape the word "Mamma" when he heard a step in the cabin and the door pulled to, without any hand touching his shoulder or stroking his head.

He raised his head and looked up. Close to the half-open door he saw a boy of about his own age standing in an attitude of someone on the lookout. He had on a pair of short trousers rolled up at the bottom, and an open sailor blouse with a great hole in the back. A thin ray of sunshine falling through a gap in the roof of the cabin lit up the thick growth of auburn curls round his neck. His feet were bare; holding the door ajar with his hands, he was gazing intently at something on the beach and did not seem to be aware of Agostino's presence. Agostino dried his eyes with the back of his hand and said: "Hello, what do you want?" The boy turned around, making a sign not to speak. He had an ugly, freckled face, the most remarkable feature of which was the rapid movement of his hard blue eyes. Agostino thought he recognized him. Probably he was the son of a fisherman or beach attendant, and he had doubtless seen him pushing out the boats or doing something about the beach.

"We're playing cops and robbers," said the boy, after a moment, turning to Agostino. "They mustn't see me."

"Which are you?" asked Agostino, hastily drying his eyes.

"A robber, of course," replied the other without looking around.

Agostino went on watching the boy. He couldn't make up his mind whether he liked him, but his voice had a rough touch of dialect which piqued him and aroused his curiosity. Besides, he felt instinctively that this boy's hiding in the cabin just at that moment was an opportunity—he could not have explained of what sort—but certainly an opportunity he must not miss.

"Will you let me play too?" he asked. The boy turned round and stared at him rudely. "How do you get into it?" he said quickly. "We're all pals playing together."

"Well," said Agostino, with shameless persistence, "let me play too."

The boy shrugged his shoulders. "It's too late now. We've almost finished the game."

"Well, in the next game."

"There won't be any more," said the boy, looking him over doubtfully, but as if struck by his persistence. "Afterwards we're going to the pine woods."

"I'll go with you, if you'll let me."

The boy seemed amused and began to laugh rather contemptuously. "You're a fine one, you are. But we don't want you."

Agostino had never been in such a position before. But the same instinct which prompted him to ask the boy if he might join their game suggested to him now a means by which he might make himself acceptable.

"Look here," he said hesitatingly, "if you . . . if you'll let me join your gang, I . . . I'll give you something."

The other turned round at once with greedy eyes.

"What'll you give me?"

"Whatever you like."

Agostino pointed to a big model of a sailboat, with all its sails attached, which was lying on the floor of the cabin among a lot of other toys.

"I'll give you that."

"What use is that to me?" replied the boy, shrugging his shoulders.

"You could sell it," Agostino suggested.

"They'd never take it," said the boy, with the air of one who knows. "They'd say it was stolen goods."

Agostino looked all round him despairingly. His mother's clothes were hanging on pegs, her shoes were on the floor, on the table was a handkerchief and a scarf or two. There was absolutely nothing in the cabin which seemed a suitable offering.

"Say," said the boy, seeing his bewilderment, "got any cigarettes?"

Agostino remembered that that very morning his mother had put two boxes of a very good brand in the big bag which was hanging from a peg; and he hastened to reply, triumphantly, "Yes, I have. Would you like some?"

"I *don't* think!" said the other, with scornful irony. "Are you stupid! Give them here, quick."

Agostino took down the bag, felt about in it and pulled out the two boxes. He held them out to the boy, as if he were not quite sure how many he wanted.

"I'll take both," he said lightly, seizing the boxes. He looked at the label and clicked his tongue approvingly and said: "You must be rich, eh?"

Agostino didn't know what to answer. The boy went on: "I'm Berto. What's your name?"

Agostino told him. But the other had ceased to pay any attention. His impatient fingers had already torn open one of the boxes, breaking the seals on its paper wrapping. He took out a cigarette and put it between his lips. Then he took a match from his pocket and struck it against the wall of the cabin; and after inhaling a mouthful of smoke and puffing it out through his nose, he resumed his watching position at the crack of the door.

"Come on, let's go," he said, after a moment, making Agostino a sign to follow him. They left the cabin one behind the other. When they got to the beach Berto made straight for the road behind the row of beach cabins.

As they walked along the burning sand between the low bushes of broom and thistles, he said: "Now we're going to the Cave . . . they've gone on past . . . they're looking for me lower down."

"Where is the Cave?" asked Agostino.

"At the Vespucci Baths," replied the boy. He held his cigarette ostentatiously between two fingers, as if to display it, and voluptuously inhaled great mouthfuls of smoke. "Don't you smoke?" he said.

"I don't care about it," said Agostino, ashamed to confess that he had never even dreamed of smoking. But Berto laughed. "Why don't you say straight out that your mother won't let you? Speak the truth." His way of saying this was contemptuous rather than friendly. He offered Agostino a cigarette, saying: "Go ahead, you smoke too."

They had reached the sea-front and were walking barefoot on the sharp flints between dried-up flower beds. Agostino put the cigarette to his lips and took a few puffs, inhaling a little smoke which he at once let out again instead of swallowing it.

Berto laughed derisively.

"You call that smoking!" he exclaimed. "That's not the way to do it. Look." He took the cigarette and inhaled deeply, rolling his sulky eyes all the while; then he opened his mouth wide and put it quite close to Agostino's eyes. There was nothing to be seen in his mouth, except his tongue curled up at the back.

"Now watch," said Berto, shutting his mouth again. And he puffed a cloud of smoke straight into Agostino's face. Agostino coughed and laughed nervously at the same time. "It's your turn now," said Berto.

A trolley passed them, whistling, its window curtains flapping in the breeze. Agostino inhaled a fresh mouthful and with a great effort swallowed the smoke. But it went the wrong way and he had a dreadful fit of coughing. Berto took the cigarette and gave him a great slap on the back, saying: "Bravo! There's no doubt about your being a smoker."

After this experiment they walked on in silence past a whole series of bath establishments, with their rows of cabins painted in bright colors, great striped umbrellas slanting in all directions, and absurd triumphal arches. The beach between the cabins was packed with noisy holiday-makers and the sparkling sea swarmed with bathers.

"Where is Vespucci?" asked Agostino, who had to walk very fast to keep up with his new friend.

"It's the last one of all."

Agostino began to wonder whether he ought not to turn back. If his mother hadn't gone out on the raft after all, she would certainly be looking for him. But the memory of that slap put his scruples to rest. In going with Berto he almost felt as if he were pursuing a mysterious and justified vendetta.

Suddenly Berto stopped and said: "How about letting the smoke out through your nose? Can you do that?" Agostino shook his head, and his companion, holding the stump of his cigarette between his lips, inhaled the smoke and expelled it through his nostrils. "Now," he went on, "I'm going to let it out through my eyes. But you must put your hand on my chest and look me straight in the face." Agostino went up to him quite innocently and put his hand on Berto's chest and fixed his eyes on Berto's, expecting to see smoke come out of them.

But Berto treacherously pressed the lighted cigarette down hard on the back of his hand and threw the butt away, jumping for joy and shouting: "Oh! you silly idiot! You just don't know anything." Agostino was almost blind with pain, and his first impulse was to fling himself on Berto and strike him. But Berto, as if he saw what was coming, stood still and clenched his fists, and with two sharp blows in the stomach almost knocked the breath out of Agostino's body.

"I'm not one for words," he said savagely. "If you ask for it you'll get it." Agostino, infuriated, rushed at him again, but he felt terribly weak and certain of being defeated. This time Berto seized him by the head, and taking it under his arm almost strangled him. Agostino did not even attempt to resist, but in a stifled voice implored him to let go. Berto released him and sprang back, planting his feet firmly on the ground in a fighting stance. But Agostino had heard the vertebrae of his neck crack, and was stupefied by the boy's extraordinary brutality. It seemed incredible that he, Agostino, who had always been kind to everyone, should suddenly be treated with such savage and deliberate cruelty. His chief feeling was one of amazement at such barbarousness. It overwhelmed him, but at the same time fascinated him because of its very novelty and because it was so monstrous.

"I haven't done you any harm," he panted, "I gave you those cigarettes . . . and you . . ." He couldn't finish. His eyes filled with tears.

"Uh, you crybaby," retorted Berto. Want your cigarettes back? I don't want them. Take them back to Mamma."

"It doesn't matter," said Agostino, shaking his head disconsolately. "I only just said it for something to say. Please keep them."

"Well, let's get on," said Berto. "We're almost there."

The burn on Agostino's hand was hurting him badly. Raising it to his lips he looked about him. On that part of the beach there were very few cabins, five or six in all, scattered about at some distance from each other. They were miserable huts of rough wood. The sand between them was deserted and the sea was equally empty. There were a few women in the shade of a boat pulled up out of reach of the tide, some standing, some lying stretched out on the sand, all dressed in antiquated bathing suits, with long drawers edged with white braid, all busy drying themselves and exposing their white limbs to the sun. A signboard painted blue bore the inscription: "Amerigo Vespucci Baths." A low green shack half-buried in the sand evidently belonged to the bath man. Beyond this the shore stretched away as far as the eye could see, without either cabins or houses, a solitude of windswept sand between the sparkling blue sea and the dusty green of the pine trees.

One entire side of the man's hut was hidden from the road by sand dunes, which were higher at this point. Then, when you had climbed to the top of the dunes, you saw a patched, faded awning of rusty red, which seemed to have been cut out of an old sail. This awning was attached at one end to two poles driven into the sand, and at the other to the hut.

"That's our cave," said Berto.

Under the awning a man seated at a rickety table was in the act of lighting a cigarette. Two or three boys were stretched on the sand around him. Berto took a flying leap and landed at the man's feet, crying: "Cave!" Agostino approached rather timidly. "This is Pisa," said

Berto, pointing to him. He was surprised to hear himself called by this nickname so soon. It was only five minutes ago that he had told Berto he was born at Pisa. Agostino lay down on the ground beside the others. The sand was not so clean as it was on the beach; bits of coconut shell and wooden splinters, fragments of earthenware and all sorts of rubbish were mixed up in it. Here and there it was caked and hard from the pails of dirty water which had been thrown out of the hut. Agostino noticed that the boys, four in all, were poorly dressed. Like Berto they were evidently the sons of sailors or bath men. "He was at the Speranza," burst out Berto, without drawing breath. "He says he wants to play at cops and robbers too, but the game's over, isn't it? I told you the game would be over."

At that moment there was a cry of "It's not fair! It's not fair!" Agostino, looking up, saw another gang of boys running from the direction of the sea, probably the cops. First came a thickset, stumpy youth of about seventeen in a bathing costume; next, to his great surprise, a Negro; the third was fair, and by his carriage and physical beauty struck Agostino as being better bred than the others. But as he got nearer, his ragged bathing suit, full of holes, and a certain coarseness in his handsome face with beautiful blue eyes, showed that he too belonged to the people. After these three boys came four more, all about the same age, between thirteen and fourteen. The big, thickset boy was so much older than the others that at first it seemed odd that he should mix with such children. But his pasty face, the color of half-baked bread; the thick, expressionless features, and an almost brutish stupidity were sufficient explanation of the company he kept. He had hardly any neck, and his smooth, hairless torso was as wide at the waist and hips as at the shoulders. "You hid in a cabin," he shouted at Berto. "I dare you to deny it! Cabins are out of bounds by the rules of the game."

"It's a lie!" retorted Berto, with equal violence. "Isn't it, Pisa?" he added, suddenly turning to Agostino. "I didn't hide in a cabin, did I? We were both standing by the hut of the Speranza, and we saw you go by, didn't we, Pisa?"

"You did hide in my cabin, you know," said Agostino, who was incapable of telling a lie. "There, you see!" shouted the other, brandishing his fist under Berto's nose. "I'll bash your head in, you liar!"

"Spy!" yelled Berto in Agostino's face. "I told you to stay where you were. Go back to Mamma, that's the place for you." He was filled with uncontrollable rage, a bestial fury which amazed and mystified Agostino. But in springing to punish him one of the cigarette boxes tumbled out of his pocket. He stooped to pick it up, but the big boy was quicker still, and darting down he pounced on the box and waved it in the air, crying triumphantly: "Cigarettes! Cigarettes!"

"Give them back," shouted Berto, hurling himself upon the big boy. "They're mine. Pisa gave them to *me*. You just give them back."

The other took a step back and waited till Berto was within range. Then he held the box of cigarettes in his mouth and began to pummel Berto's stomach methodically with his two fists. Finally he kicked Berto's feet from under and brought him down with a crash. "Give me them back!" Berto went on shouting, while he rolled in the sand. But the big boy, with a stupid laugh, called out: "He's got some more . . . at him, boys." And with a unanimity which surprised Agostino all the boys flung themselves upon Berto. For a moment there was nothing to be seen but a writhing mass of bodies tangled together in a cloud of sand at the feet of the man, who went on smoking calmly at the table. At last, the fair boy, who seemed to be the most agile, disentangled himself from the heap and got up, triumphantly waving the second box of cigarettes. Then the others got up, one by one; and last of all Berto. His ugly, freckled little face was convulsed with fury. "Swine! Thieves!" he bellowed, shaking his fist and sobbing.

It was a strange and novel impression for Agostino to see his tormentor tormented in his turn, and treated as pitilessly as he himself had just been. "Swine! Swine!" Berto screamed again. The big boy went up to him and gave him a resounding box on the ear, which made his companions dance for joy. "Do you want any more?" Berto rushed like a mad one to the corner of the hut and, bending down, grabbed hold of a large rock with both hands and flung it at his enemy, who with a derisive whistle sprang aside to avoid it. "You swine!" yelled Berto again, still sobbing with rage, but withdrawing himself prudently behind a corner of the hut. His sobs were loud and furious, as if giving vent to some frightful bitterness, but his companions had ceased to take any interest in him. They were all stretched out again on the sand. The big boy opened one box of cigarettes, and the fair boy another. Suddenly the man, who had remained seated at the little table without moving during the fight, said: "Hand over those cigarettes."

Agostino looked at him. He was a tall, fat man of about fifty. He had a cold and deceptively good-natured face. He was bald, with a curious saddle-shaped forehead and twinkling eyes; a red, aquiline nose with wide nostrils full of little scarlet veins horrible to look at. He had a drooping mustache, which hid a rather crooked mouth, and a cigar between his lips. He was wearing a faded shirt and a pair of blue cotton trousers with one leg down to his ankle and the other rolled up below his knee. A black sash was wound round his stomach. One detail in particular added to Agostino's first feeling of revulsion, the fact that Saro—for this was his name—had six fingers instead of five on both hands. This made them look enormous, and his fingers like abbreviated tentacles. Agostino could not take his eyes off those hands; he could not make up his mind whether Saro had two first or two middle or two third fingers. They all seemed of equal length, except the little finger, which stuck out from his hand like a small branch at the base of a knotty tree trunk. Saro took the cigar out of his mouth and repeated simply: "What about those cigarettes?"

The fair boy got up and put his box on the table. "Good for you, Sandro," said Saro.

"And supposing I won't give you them?" shouted the elder boy defiantly.

"Give them up, Tortima; you'd better," called out several voices at once. Tortima looked all round and then at Saro, who with the six fingers of his right hand on the box of cigarettes, kept his half-closed little eyes fixed on him. Then, with the remark: "All right, but it isn't fair," he came over and put his box down on the table too.

"And now I'll divide them," said Saro, in a soft, affable voice. Without removing his cigar, he screwed up his eyes, opened one of the boxes, took out a cigarette with his stumpy, multiple fingers, which looked incapable of gripping it, and threw it to the Negro, with a "Catch, Homs!" Then he took another and threw it to one of the others; a third he threw into the joined palms of Sandro; a fourth straight at Tortima's stolid face—and so with all the rest. "Do you want one?" he asked Berto, who, swallowing back his sobs, had come silently back to join the others. He nodded sulkily, and was thrown one. When each of the boys had received his cigarette, Saro was about to shut the box, which was still half-full, when he stopped and said to Agostino: "What about you Pisa?" Agostino would have liked to refuse, but Berto gave him a dig in the ribs and whispered: "Ask for one, idiot, we'll smoke it together afterward." So Agostino said he would like one, and he too had his cigarette. Then Saro shut the box.

"What about the rest? What about the rest?" shouted all the boys at once.

"You shall have the rest another day," replied Saro calmly. "Pisa, take these cigarettes and go and put them in the hut." There was complete silence. Agostino nervously took both boxes and, stepping over the boys' prostrate bodies, crossed to the shed. It appeared to consist of one room only, and he liked its smallness, which made it seem like a house in a fairy tale. It had a low ceiling with whitewashed beams, and the walls were of unplaned planks. Two tiny windows, complete with window sill, little square panes of glass, latches, curtains, even a vase or two of flowers, diffused a mild light. One corner was occupied by the bed, neatly made up, with a clean pillowcase and red counterpane; in another stood a round table and three stools. On the marble top of a big chest stood two of those bottles which have sailboats or steamships imprisoned inside them. Sails were hung on hooks all round the walls, and there were pairs of oars and other sea tackle. Agostino thought how he should love to own a cottage as cosy and convenient as this. He went up to the table, on which lay a big, cracked china bowl full of half-smoked cigarettes, put down his two boxes and went out again into the sunlight.

All the boys were lying face downward on the sand around Saro, smoking with great demonstrations of enjoyment. And meanwhile they were discussing something about which they did not seem to agree. Sandro was just saying: "I tell you it *is* him."

"His mother's a real beauty," said an admiring voice. "She's the best looker on the beach. Homs and me got under the cabin one day to see her undress, but her chemise fell just above the crack we were looking through and we couldn't see anything at all. Her legs, gee, and her breasts. . . ."

"You never see the husband anywhere about," said a third voice.

"You needn't worry, she satisfies herself. . . . D'you know who with? That young guy from Villa Sorriso . . . the dark one. He takes her out every day on his raft."

"He's not the only one either. She'd take anyone on," said someone maliciously.

"But I know it's not him," insisted another.

"Say, Pisa," said Sandro suddenly. "Isn't that your mother, that lady at the Speranza? She's tall and dark, with long legs, and wears a striped two-piece bathing suit . . . and she's got a mole on the left side of her mouth."

"Yes, why?" asked Agostino, nervously.

"It *is* her, it *is* her," cried Berto triumphantly. And then, in a burst of jealous spite: "You're just their blind, aren't you? You all go out together, her and you, and her gigolo. You're their blind, aren't you?" At these words everyone roared with laughter. Even Saro smiled under his mustache. "I don't know what you mean," said Agostino, blushing and only half-understanding. He wanted to protest, but their coarse jokes aroused in him a curious and unexpected sense of sadistic satisfaction. As if by their words the boys had, all unawares, avenged the humiliations which his mother had inflicted on him all these days past. At the same time he was struck dumb with horror at their knowing so much about his private affairs.

"Innocent little lamb," said the same malicious voice. "I'd like to know what they're up to; they always go a long way out," said Tortima with mock gravity. "Come on, tell us what they do. He kisses her, eh?" He put the back of his hand to his lips and gave it a smacking kiss.

"It's quite true," said Agostino, flushing with shame; "we do go a long way out to swim."

"Oh yes, to swim!" came sarcastically from several voices at once.

"My mother does swim, and so does Renzo."

"Ah, yes, Renzo, that's his name," affirmed the boy, as if recovering a lost thread in his memory. "Renzo, that tall dark fellow."

"And what do Renzo and Mamma do together?" suddenly asked Berto, quite restored. "Is it this they do?" and he made an expressive gesture with his hand, "And you just look on, eh?"

"I?" questioned Agostino, turning around with a look of terror.

They all burst out laughing and smothered their merriment in the sand. But Saro continued to observe him attentively, without moving. Agostino looked around despairingly, as if to implore aid.

Saro seemed to be struck by his look. He took his cigar out his mouth, and said: "Can't you see he knows absolutely nothing?"

The din was immediately silenced. "How do you mean, he doesn't know?" asked Tortima, who hadn't understood.

"He just doesn't know," repeated Saro, simply. And turning to Agostino, he said in a softer voice: "Speak up, Pisa. A man and a woman, what is it they do together? Don't you know?"

They all listened breathlessly. Agostino stared at Saro, who continued to smoke and watch him through half-closed eyelids. He looked round at the boys, who were evidently bursting with stifled laughter, and repeated mechanically, through the cloud which seemed to cover his sight: "A man and a woman?"

"Yes, your mother and Renzo," explained Berto brutally.

Agostino wanted to say "Don't talk about my mother," but the question awoke in him a whole swarm of sensations and memories, and he was too upset to say anything at all. "He doesn't know," said Saro abruptly, shifting his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. "Which of you boys is going to tell him?" Agostino looked around bewildered. It was like being at school, but what a strange schoolmaster! What odd schoolfellows! "Me, me, me! . . ." all the boys shouted at once. Saro's glance rested dubiously on all those faces burning with eagerness to be the first to speak. Then he said: "You don't really know either, any of you. You've only got it from hearsay. . . . Let someone tell him who really knows." Agostino saw them all eyeing each other in silence. Then someone said: "Tortima." An expression of vanity lit up the youth's face. He was just going to get up when Berto said, with hatred in his voice: "He made it all up, himself. . . . It's a pack of lies. . . ."

"What d'you mean, a pack of lies?" shouted Tortima, flinging himself upon Berto. "It's you who tells lies, you bastard!" But this time Berto was too quick for him, and from behind the corner of the hut he began making faces and putting out his tongue at Tortima, his red, freckled face distorted by hatred. Tortima contented himself with threatening him with his fist and shouting: "You dare come back!" But somehow Berto's intervention had wrecked his chances, and the boys with one accord voted for Sandro. His arms crossed over his broad brown chest on which shone a few golden hairs, Sandro, handsome and elegant, advanced into the circle of boys stretched out on the sand. Agostino noticed that his strong, bronzed legs looked as if they were dusted over with gold. A few fair hairs also showed through the gaps in his bathing trunks. "It's quite simple," he said in a strong, clear voice. And speaking slowly with the aid of gestures which were significant without being coarse, he explained to Agostino what he now felt he had always known but had somehow forgotten, as in a deep sleep. Sandro's explanation was followed by other less sober ones. Some of the boys made vulgar gestures with their hands, others dinned into Agostino's ears coarse words which he had never heard before; two of them said: "We'll show him what they do," and gave a demonstration on the hot sand, jerking and writhing in each other's arms. Sandro, satisfied with his success, went off alone to finish his cigar. "Do you understand now?" asked Saro, as soon as the din had died down. Agostino nodded. In reality he hadn't so much understood as absorbed the notion, rather as one absorbs a medicine or poison, the effect of which is not immediately felt but will be sure to manifest itself later on. The idea was not in his empty, bewildered and anguished mind, but in some other part of his being; in his embittered heart, or deep in his breast, which received it with amazement. It was like some bright, dazzling object, which one cannot look at for the radiance it emits, so that one can only guess its real shape. He felt it was something he had always possessed but only now experienced in his blood.

"Renzo and Pisa's mother," he heard someone say close beside him. "I'll be Renzo and you be Pisa's mother. Let's try." He turned suddenly and saw Berto, who with an awkward, ceremonious gesture was making a bow to another boy. "Madam, may I have the honor of your company on my raft? I'm going for a swim. Pisa will accompany us." Then suddenly blind rage took possession of him and flinging himself upon Berto he yelled: "I forbid you to talk about my mother." But before he knew what had happened he was lying on his back on the sand, with Berto's knee holding him down and Berto's fists raining blows on his face. He wanted to cry, but realizing that his tears would only be an opening for more jeers, he controlled them with great effort. Then, covering his face with his arm, he lay as still as death. Berto left him alone after a bit, and feeling very ill-treated he went and sat down at Saro's feet. The boys were already busy talking about something else. One of them suddenly asked Agostino: "Are you rich, you people?"

Agostino was so intimidated that he hardly knew what to say. But he replied: "I think so."

"How much? . . . A million? Two millions? . . . Three millions?"

"I don't know," said Agostino, feeling bothered.

"Got a big house?"

"Yes," said Agostino; and somewhat reassured by the more courteous turn of the conversation, pride of possession prompted him to add: "We have twenty rooms."

"Bum . . ." came incredulously from someone.

"We've got two reception rooms and then there's my father's study . . ."

"Aha!" said a scornful voice.

"Or it *used* to be my father's," Agostino hastened to add, half-hoping that this detail might make them feel a little more sympathetic towards him. "My father is dead."

There was a moment's silence. "So your mother's a widow?" said Tortima.

"Well, of course," came from several mocking voices.

"That's not saying anything," protested Tortima. "She might have married again."

"No, she hasn't married again," said Agostino.

"And have you got a car?"

"Yes."

"And a chauffeur?"

"Yes."

"Tell your mother I'm ready to be her chauffeur," shouted someone.

"And what do you do in those reception rooms?" asked Tortima, on whom Agostino's account seemed to make more impression than on anyone else. "Do you give dances?"

"Yes, my mother has receptions," replied Agostino.

"Lots of pretty women, you bet," said Tortima, as if speaking to himself. "How many people come?"

"I don't really know."

"How many?"

"Twenty or thirty," said Agostino, who by now felt quite at his ease and was rather gratified by his success.

"Twenty or thirty . . . What do they do?"

"What do you expect them to do?" asked Berto ironically. "I suppose they dance and amuse themselves. They're rich . . . not like us. They make love, I suppose."

"No, they don't make love," said Agostino conscientiously, for the sake of showing that he knew perfectly well what they meant.

Tortima seemed to be struggling with an idea which he was unable to formulate. At last he said: "But supposing I was to appear at one of those receptions, and say: 'I've come too.' What would you do?" As he spoke he got up and marched forward impudently, with his hands on his hips and his chest stuck out. The boys burst out laughing. "I should ask you to go away," said Agostino simply, emboldened by the laughter of the boys.

"And supposing I refused to go away?"

"I should make our men turn you out."

"Have you got menservants?"

"No, but my mother hires waiters when she has a reception."

"Bah, just like your father." One of the boys was evidently the son of a waiter.

"And supposing I resisted, and broke that waiter's nose for him, and then marched into the middle of the room and shouted, 'You're a lot of rogues and bitches, the whole lot of you.' What would you say?" insisted Tortima, advancing threateningly upon Agostino, and turning his fist round and round, as if to let him smell it. But this time they all turned against Tortima, not so much from a wish to protect Agostino as from the desire to hear more details of his fabulous wealth.

"Leave him alone . . . they'd kick you out, and a good thing too," was heard on all sides. Berto said sneeringly: "What have you got to do with it? Your father's a boatman and you'll be a boatman too; and if you did turn up at Pisa's house you certainly wouldn't shout anything. I can see you," he added, getting up and mimicking Tortima's supposed humility in Agostino's house . . . "'Excuse me, is Mr. Pisa at home? Excuse me . . . I just came . . . Oh, he can't? . . . Never mind, please excuse me . . . I'm so sorry . . . I'll come another time.' Oh, I can see you. Why, you'd bow down to the ground."

All the boys burst out laughing. Tortima, who was as stupid as he was brutal, didn't dare stand up to their taunts. But in order to get even he said to Agostino: "Can you make an iron arm?"

"An iron arm?" repeated Agostino.

"He don't know what an iron arm is," said several voices, derisively. Sandro came over and took hold of Agostino's arm and doubled it up, and told him to stay with his hand in the air and his elbow in the sand. Meanwhile Tortima lay face downward on the sand and placed his arm in a similar position. "You push from one side," said Sandro, "and Tortima will push from the other."

Agostino took Tortima's hand. The latter at one stroke brought down his arm and got up triumphantly.

"Let me try," said Berto. He brought down Agostino's arm just as easily and got up in his turn. "Me too, me too!" cried all the others. One after another they all beat Agostino. At last it was the Negro's turn, and someone said: "If you let Homs beat you, well, your arm must be made of putty." Agostino made up his mind not to let the Negro beat him.

The Negro's arms were thin, the color of roasted coffee. He thought his own looked stronger. "Come on, Pisa," said Homs, with sham bravado, as he lay down facing him. He had a weak voice, like a woman's, and when he brought his face to within an inch of Agostino's, he saw that his nose, instead of being flat, as you might have expected, was almost aquiline, and curved in on itself like a black, shiny curl of flesh, with a pale, almost yellow mole above one nostril. Nor were his lips broad and thick like a Negro's, but thin and violet-colored. He had round eyes with large whites, on which his protuberant forehead with its great mop of sooty wool seemed to press. "Come on, Pisa, I won't hurt you," he said, putting his delicate hand with its thin, rose-nailed fingers in Agostino's. Agostino saw that by raising himself slightly on his shoulder he could easily have brought his whole weight to bear on his hand, and this simple fact allowed him at first to keep Homs under his control. For quite a while they competed without either of them getting the upper hand, surrounded by a circle of admiring boys. Agostino's face wore a look of great concentration; he was putting his whole strength into the effort; whereas the Negro made fearful grimaces, grinding his white teeth and screwing up his eyes. Suddenly a surprised voice proclaimed: "Pisa's winning!" But at that very moment Agostino felt an excruciating pain running from his shoulder right down his arm; he could bear no more, and gave in, saying: "No, he's stronger than me." "You'll beat me next time," said the Negro in an unpleasantly honeyed voice, as he rose from the ground. "Fancy Homs beating you too, you're good for nothing," sneered Tortima. But the other boys seemed tired of ragging Agostino. "How about a swim?" said someone. "Yes, yes, a swim!" they all cried, and they set off by leaps and bounds over the hot sand to the sea. Agostino, trailing behind, saw them turning somersaults like fish into the shallow water, with shouts and screams of joy. As he reached the water's edge Tortima emerged, bottom first, like a huge sea-animal, and called out: "Dive in, Pisa. What are you doing?"

"But I'm dressed," said Agostino.

"Get undressed then," returned Tortima crossly. Agostino tried to escape, but it was too late. Tortima caught hold of him and dragged him along, struggling and pulling his tormentor over with him. He only let him go when he had almost suffocated him by holding his head under water. Then with a "Good-bye, Pisa," he swam off. Some way out Agostino could see Sandro standing in an elegant posture on a raft, in the middle of a swarm of boys, all trying to climb on to the floats. Wet and panting he returned to the beach and stood a few moments watching the raft going further and further out to sea, all alone under the blinding sunshine. Then hurrying along the burnished sand at the water's edge, he made his way back to the Speranza.

IT WAS not so late as he feared. When he reached the bathing place he found that his mother had not yet returned. The beach was emptying; only a few isolated bathers still loitered in the dazzling water. The majority were trailing languidly off in single file under the midday sun up the tiled path which led from the beach. Agostino sat down under the big umbrella and waited. He thought his mother was staying out an unusually long time. He forgot that the young man had arrived much later than usual with his raft and that it was not his mother who had wanted to go out alone, but he who had disappeared; and said to himself that those two had certainly profited by his absence to do what Saro and the boys had suggested. He no longer felt any jealousy about this, but experienced a new and strange quiver of curiosity and secret approval, as if he were himself an accomplice. It was quite natural for his mother to behave like that with the young man, to go out with him every day on the float, and at a safe distance from prying eyes to fling herself into his arms. It was natural, and he was now perfectly well able to accept the fact. These thoughts passed through his mind as he sat scanning the sea for the return of the lovers. At length the raft appeared, a bright speck on the sea, and as it drew rapidly nearer he could see his mother sitting on the bench and the young man rowing. Every stroke of the oars as they rose and fell left a glittering track in the water. He got up and went down to the water's edge. He wanted to see his mother land, and to discover some traces of the intimacy at which he had assisted so long without understanding, and which, in the light of the revelations that Saro and the boys had made, must surely be brazenly advertised in their behavior. As the raft came near the shore his mother waved to him, then sprang gaily into the water and was soon at his side. "Are you hungry? We'll go and have something to eat at once. . . . Good-bye, good-bye till tomorrow. . . ." she added in a caressing voice, turning to wave to the young man. Agostino thought she seemed happier than usual, and as he followed her across the beach he could not help thinking there had been a note of joyous intoxication in her farewell to the young man; as if what her son's presence had hitherto prevented had actually taken place that day. But his observations and suspicions went no further than this; for apart from her naïve joy, which was something quite different from her customary dignity, he could not really picture what might have happened while they were out together, nor imagine what their relations actually were. Though he scrutinized her face, her neck, her hands, her body with a new and cruel awareness, they did not seem to bear any trace of the kisses and caresses they had received. The more Agostino watched his mother the more dissatisfied he felt. "You were alone today . . . without me . . ." he began, as they approached the cabin; almost hoping she would say: "Yes, and at last we were able to make love." But his mother only seemed to treat this remark as an allusion to the slap she had given him, and to his running away. "Don't let's say any more about that," she said, stopping and putting her arm around his shoulders, and looking at him with her laughing, excited eyes. "I know you love me; give me a kiss and we won't say any more about it, eh?" Agostino suddenly felt his lips against her neck—that neck whose chaste perfume and warmth had been so sweet to him. But now he fancied he felt beneath his lips, however faintly, a stirring of something new, as it were a sharp quiver of reaction to the young man's kisses. Then she ran up the steps to the cabin, and he lay down on the sand, his face burning with a shame he could not comprehend.

Later, as they were walking back together, he stirred up these new mysterious feelings in his troubled mind. Before, when he had been ignorant of good and evil, his mother's relations with the young man had seemed to him mysteriously tinged with guilt, but now that Saro and his disciples had opened his eyes, he was, strange to say, full of doubt and unsatisfied curiosity. It was indeed the frank jealousy of his childish love for his mother which had first aroused his sensibilities; whereas now, in the clear, cruel light of day, this love, though as great as ever, was replaced by a bitter, disillusioned curiosity compared with which those early, faint evidences seemed insipid and insufficient. Formerly, every word and gesture which he felt unbecoming had offended without enlightening him, and he wished he had not seen them. Now that he came to look back, those small, tasteless gestures which used to scandalize him seemed mere trifles, and he almost wished he could surprise his mother in some of the shameless attitudes into which Saro and the boys had so recently initiated him.

He would never have hit so soon on the idea of spying on his mother with the direct intention of destroying the halo of dignity and respect which had hitherto enveloped her, had he not that very day been driven by chance to take a step in that direction. When they reached home mother and son ate their luncheon in silence. His mother seemed distrait, and Agostino, full of new and, to him, incredible thoughts, was unusually silent. But after lunch he suddenly felt an irresistible desire to go out and join the gang of boys again. They had told him they met at the Vespucci bathing place early in the afternoon, to plan the day's adventures, and when he had got over his first fear and repugnance the company of those young hooligans began to exercise a mysterious attraction over him. He was lying on his bed with the shutters closed; it was warm and dark. He was playing as usual with the wooden switch of the electric light. Few sounds came to him from outside; the wheels of a solitary carriage, the clatter of plates and glasses through the open windows of the *pension* opposite. In contrast with the silence of the summer afternoon the sounds inside the house seemed to stand out more clearly, as if cut off from the rest. He heard his mother go into the next room and her heels tapping on the tiled floor. She went to and fro, opening and shutting drawers, moving chairs about, touching this and that. "She's gone to lie down," he thought suddenly, shaking off the torpor which was gradually invading his senses; "and then I shan't be able to tell her I want to go on the beach." He sprang up in alarm at the thought, and went out on the landing. His room looked over the balcony facing the stairs, and his mother's room was next to his. He went to her door, but finding it ajar, instead of knocking as he generally did, he gently pushed the door half open, moved perhaps by an unconscious desire to spy upon his mother's intimacy. His mother's room was much bigger than his, and the bed was by the door; directly facing the door was a chest of drawers, with a large mirror above it. The first thing he saw was his mother standing in front of the chest of drawers. She was not naked, as he had pictured and almost hoped when he went in so quietly; but she was partly undressed and was just taking off her necklace and earrings in front of the glass. She had on a flimsy chiffon chemise which only came half-way down her loins. As she stood leaning languidly to one side, one hip was higher and more prominent than the other, and below her solid but graceful thighs her slender, well-shaped legs tapered to delicate ankles. Her arms were raised to unfasten the clasp of her necklace and, through the transparent chiffon, this movement was perceptible all down her back, curiously modifying the contours of her body. With her hands raised thus, her armpits looked like the jaws of two snakes and the long, soft hair darted out of them like thin black tongues, as if glad to escape from the pressure of her heavy limbs. All her splendid, massive body seemed to Agostino's fascinated eyes to lose its solidity and sway and palpitate in the twilight of the room, as if nudity acted on it as a leaven and endowed it with a strange faculty of expansion; so that at one moment it seemed to billow outwards in innumerable curves, at another to taper upwards to a giant height, and to fill the space between floor and ceiling.

Agostino's first impulse was to hurry away again, but suddenly that new thought, "It is a woman," rooted him to the spot, with wide-open eyes, holding fast to the door handle. He felt his filial soul rebel at this immobility and try to drag him back; but the new mind which was already strong in him, though still a little timid, forced his reluctant eyes to stare pitilessly at what yesterday he would not have dared to look upon. And during this conflict between repulsion and attraction, surprise and pleasure, all the details of the picture he was contemplating stood out more distinctly and forcibly: the movements of her legs, the indolent curve of her back, the profile of her armpits. And they seemed to correspond exactly to his new conception, which was awaiting these confirmations in order to take complete sway over his imagination. Precipitated in one moment from respect and reverence to their exact opposite, he would almost have liked to see the improprieties of her unconscious nudity develop before his eyes into conscious wantonness. The astonishment in his eyes changed to curiosity, the attention which riveted them and which he fancied to be scientific in reality owed its false objectivity to the cruelty of the sentiment controlling him.

And while his blood surged up to his brain he kept saying to himself: "She is a woman, nothing but a woman," and he somehow felt these words to be lashes of insult and contempt on her back and legs.

When his mother had taken off her necklace and put it down on the marble top of the chest of drawers, she began with a graceful movement of both hands to remove her earrings. In order to do so she held her head slightly to one side, turning a little away from the glass. Agostino was afraid she might catch sight of him in the big standing mirror which was nearby in the bay window; for he could see himself in it, standing furtively there, just inside the folding door. He raised his hand with an effort, knocked at the doorpost and said: "May I come in?"

"One moment, darling," said his mother calmly. Agostino saw her disappear from sight and, after rummaging about for a while, reappear in a long blue silk dressing gown.

"Mamma," said Agostino, without lifting his eyes from the ground, "I am going down to the beach."

"Now?" said his mother, abstractedly. "But it's so hot. Hadn't you better sleep a little first?" She put out one hand and stroked his cheek, while with the other she rearranged a stray lock of her smooth black hair.

Agostino suddenly become a child again, said nothing but remained standing, as he always did when any request of his had been refused, obstinately dumb, and looking down, his chin glued to his chest. His mother knew that gesture so well that she interpreted it in the usual way. "Well, if you really want to very much," she said, "go to the kitchen first and get them to give you something to take with you. But don't eat it now . . . put it in the cabin . . . and mind you don't bathe before five o'clock. Besides, I shall be out by then and we'll swim together." They were the same instructions she always gave him.

Agostino made no reply, and ran barefooted down the stone stairs. He heard his mother's door close gently behind him. He put on his sandals in the hall and went out on to the road. The white blaze of the midday sun enveloped him in its silent furnace. At the end of the road the motionless sea sparkled in the remote, quivering atmosphere. In the opposite direction the red trunks of the pine trees bent under the weight of their heavy green cones.

He debated with himself whether to go to the Vespucci Baths by the beach or by the forest; but chose the former, for though he would be much more exposed to the sun he would be in no danger of passing the baths without seeing them. He followed the road as long as it ran by the sea, then hurried along as fast as he could, keeping close to the walls. Without his realizing it, what attracted him to the Vespucci, apart from the novel companionship of the boys, were their coarse comments on his mother and her supposed amours. He was conscious that his former disposition was changing into quite a different feeling, crueller and more objective, and he thought that their clumsy ironies, by the very fact that they hastened this change, ought to be sought out and cultivated. Why he so much wanted to stop loving his mother, why he even hated himself for loving her, he would have been unable to say. Perhaps because he felt he had been deceived and had thought her to be different from what she really was, or perhaps because, not being able to go on loving her simply and innocently as he had done before, he preferred to stop loving her altogether and to look on her merely as an ordinary woman. He was instinctively trying to free himself once for all from the encumbrance of his old, innocent love which he felt to have been shamefully betrayed; for now it seemed to him mere foolishness and ignorance. And so the same cruel attraction which a few minutes ago had kept his eyes fixed on his mother's back now drove him to seek out the humiliating and coarse companionship of those boys. Might not their scoffing remarks, like her half-revealed nakedness, help to destroy the old filial relationship which was now so hateful to him? When he came within sight of the baths he slowed down, and though his heart was beating violently so that he could hardly breathe, he assumed an air of indifference.

Saro was sitting as before at his rickety table, on which were a half-empty bottle of wine, a glass, and a bowl containing the remains of fish soup. But there seemed to be no one else about, though as he got nearer the curtain opened and he saw the black body of the Negro boy Homs lying on the white sand.

Saro took no notice at all of the Negro, but went on smoking meditatively, a dilapidated old straw hat rammed down over one eye. "Aren't they here?" asked Agostino in a tone of disappointment. Saro looked up and observed him for a moment, then said: "They've gone to Rio." Rio was a deserted part of the shore, a few kilometers further on, where a stream ran into the sea between sandbanks and reeds.

"Oh dear," said Agostino regretfully, "they've gone to Rio . . . what for?"

It was the Negro who replied. "They've gone to have a picnic there," and he put his hand to his mouth with an expressive gesture. But Saro shook his head and said: "You boys won't be happy till someone's put a bullet through you." It was clear that their picnic was only a pretext for stealing fruit in the orchards; at least, so it seemed to Agostino.

"I didn't go with them," put in the Negro obsequiously, as if to ingratiate himself with Saro.

"You didn't go because you didn't want to," said Saro calmly.

The Negro rolled in the sand, protesting: "I didn't go because I wanted to stay with you."

He spoke in a honeyed, singsong voice. Saro said contemptuously: "Who gave you permission to be so familiar, you little nigger? We're not brothers as far as I know."

"No, we're not brothers," said the other in an unruffled, even triumphant tone, as if the observation gave him profound satisfaction.

"You keep your place then," said Saro. Then, turning to Agostino: "They've gone to steal some corn. That's what their picnic'll be."

"Are they coming back?" asked Agostino anxiously. Saro said nothing but kept looking at Agostino and seemed to be turning something over in his mind. "They won't be back very soon," he replied slowly; "not till late. But if you like we'll go after them."

"But how?"

"In the boat," said Saro.

"Oh yes, let's go in the boat," said the Negro. He sprang up, all eagerness, and approached Saro, but the latter did not give him a glance.

"I have a sailboat . . . in about half an hour we shall be at Rio, if the wind's favorable."

"Yes, let's go," said Agostino happily. "But if they're in the fields how shall we find them?"

"Never you fear," said Saro, getting up and giving a twist to the black sash round his stomach. "We shall find them all right." Then he turned to the Negro, who was watching him anxiously, and added: "Come on, nigger, help me carry down the sail and mast."

"I'm coming, Saro, I'm coming," reiterated the jubilant Negro, and he followed Saro down to the boat.

Left by himself Agostino stood up and looked round him. A light wind had sprung up from the northwest, and the sea, covered now with tiny wavelets, had changed to an almost violet blue. The shore was enveloped in a haze of sun and sand, as far as the eye could see. Agostino, who did not know where Rio was, followed with a nostalgic eye the capricious indentations of the lonely coast line. Where was Rio? Somewhere out there, he supposed, where earth, sky and sea were mingled in one confused blackness under the pitiless sun. He looked forward intensely to the expedition, and would not have missed it for worlds.

He was startled from these reflections by the voices of the two coming out of the hut. Saro was carrying on one arm a pile of ropes and sails, while in the other he hugged a bottle. Behind him walked the Negro, brandishing like a spear a tall mast partly painted green. "Well, let's be off," said Saro, starting down the beach without glancing at Agostino. His manner seemed to Agostino curiously hurried, quite different from his usual one. He also noticed that those repulsive red nostrils looked redder and more inflamed than usual, as if all their network of little branching veins had suddenly become swollen with an inrush of blood. "*Si va . . . si va . . .*" intoned the Negro behind Saro, improvising a sort of dance on the sand, with the mast under his arm. But Saro had nearly reached the huts and the Negro slackened his pace to wait for Agostino. When he was near, the Negro signaled him to stop. Agostino did so.

"Listen," said the Negro, with an air of familiarity. "I've got to talk something over with Saro . . . please oblige . . . please . . . by not coming. Go away, please!"

"Why?" asked Agostino, much surprised.

"I told you I've got to talk something over with him . . . just the two of us," said the other impatiently, stamping his foot on the ground.

"I *must* go to Rio," replied Agostino.

"You can go another time."

"No—I can't."

The Negro looked at him, and his eyes and trembling nostrils betrayed a passionate eagerness which revolted Agostino. "Listen, Pisa," he said, "if you'll stay behind I'll give you something you've never seen before." He dropped the mast and felt in his pocket and brought out a slingshot made of a fork of pinewood and two elastics bound together. "It's lovely, isn't it," and the Negro held it up.

But Agostino wanted to go to Rio. Besides, the Negro's insistence aroused his suspicions. "No, I can't," he said.

"Take it," the other said again, feeling for Agostino's hand and trying to force the slingshot into his palm. "Take it and go away."

"No," repeated Agostino, "I can't."

"I'll give you the slingshot and these cards, too," said the Negro, feeling in his pocket again; and he drew out a small pack of cards with pink backs and gilt edges. "Take them all and go away. You can kill birds with the slingshot . . . the cards are quite new."

"I told you I won't," said Agostino.

The Negro turned on him an eye of passionate entreaty. Great drops of sweat shone on his forehead, his whole face was contorted in an expression of utter misery. "But why won't you?" he whined.

"I don't want to," said Agostino, and he suddenly ran towards the bath man, who was now standing by the boat. As he reached Saro he heard the Negro call after him: "You'll be sorry for this." The boat was resting on two rollers of unplaned fir a short way up the beach. Saro had thrown the sails into the boat and seemed to be waiting impatiently. "What's he up to?" he asked Agostino, pointing to the Negro.

"He's just coming," said Agostino.

And in fact the Negro came running over the sand with great leaps, holding the mast under his arm. Saro took hold of the mast with the six fingers of his right hand, and with the six fingers of his left reared it up and planted it in a hole in the middle seat. Then he got into the boat, fastened the sail and loosened the sheet. Saro turned to the Negro and said: "Now let's shove off from underneath."

Saro stood beside the boat, grasping the edges of the prow, while the Negro made ready to push from behind.

Agostino, not knowing what to do, looked on. The boat was of medium size, part white and part green. On the prow, in black lettering, was written *Amelia*. "*Ah . . . issa*," commanded Saro. The boat slid forward on its rollers over the sand. As soon as the keel passed over the hindmost roller the Negro bent down and took it in his arms, pressing it to his breast like a baby; then leaping over the sand as in a novel kind of ballet, he ran and placed it under the prow. "*Ah . . . issa*," repeated Saro.

The boat slid forward again quite a distance, and again the Negro gamboled and caracoled from stern to prow, with the roller in his arms; one last shove, and the prow of the boat dipped into the water and it was afloat. Saro got in and placed the oars in the rowlocks; then, grasping one in each hand, he motioned to Agostino to jump in, excluding the Negro as if by prearrangement. Agostino entered the water up to his knees and tried to climb in. He would never have succeeded had not the six fingers of Saro's right hand seized him firmly by one arm and pulled him up like a cat. He looked up. Saro was lifting him with one arm, without looking in his direction, for he was busy adjusting the left-hand oar. Agostino, in disgust at being grasped by those fingers, went off and sat in the stern. "Good," said Saro, "you stay there; now we are going to take her out."

"Wait for me, I'm coming too!" shouted the Negro from the shore. Exhausted by his efforts he sprang into the water and seized the edge of the boat. But Saro said: "No, you're not coming."

"What am I to do?" cried the boy, in an agony of disappointment. "What am I to do?"

"You can take the trolley," answered Saro, standing up in the boat and pulling hard. "You'll get there before us, see if you don't."

"But why, Saro?" wailed the Negro, thrashing along in the water beside the boat. "Why, Saro? I want to go too."

Without a word Saro dropped his oars, bent over and covered the Negro's face with his enormous hand. "I've told you you're not coming," he said quietly, and with one push sent the Negro over backward in the water. "Why, Saro?" he went on wailing. "Why, Saro?" and his melancholy voice, mingled with the splashing of the oars, made an unpleasant impression on Agostino and aroused in him an uneasy sense of pity. He looked at Saro, who smiled and said: "He's such a nuisance. What do we want with him?"

The boat was already some way from the shore. Agostino looked round and saw the Negro get out of the water and, as he thought, shake his fist threateningly at him.

Saro silently took out the oars and laid them down in the bottom of the boat. Then he went to the prow, undid the sail and fastened it to the mast. The sail fluttered uncertainly for a moment, as if the wind were blowing on both sides of it at once; then suddenly, with a violent shock swelled in the wind and leaned over to the left. The boat obediently settled down on its left side too, and began to skim over the waves, driven by the light breeze. "Good," said Saro, "now we can lie down and rest a bit." He settled down in the bottom of the boat and invited Agostino to lie beside him. "If we sit in the bottom," he explained, "the boat goes faster." Agostino obeyed, and lay down beside Saro.

The boat made swift progress in spite of its heavy build, rising and falling with the little waves and occasionally rearing up like a foal which feels the bit for the first time. Saro lay with his head resting against the seat, and one arm behind Agostino's neck, controlling the rudder. For a while he said nothing; then: "Do you go to school?" he asked at last.

Agostino looked up. Saro was half-lying and seemed to be exposing his wide, inflamed nostrils to the sea air, as if to refresh them. His mouth was open under his mustache, his eyes half-shut. His unbuttoned shirt revealed the dirty, grey, ruffled hair on his chest. "Yes," said Agostino, suddenly trembling with fear.

"What class are you in?"

"The third."

"Give me your hand," said Saro; and before Agostino could refuse he seized hold of it. To Agostino his grasp felt like a vice. The six short, stumpy fingers encircled his whole hand and met below it. "What do they teach you?" Saro went on, stretching himself out more comfortably and sinking into a kind of ecstasy.

"Latin . . . Italian . . . geography . . . history . . ." stammered Agostino.

"Do they teach you poetry . . . lovely poetry?" asked Saro, in a low voice.

"Yes," said Agostino, "poetry as well."

"Recite some to me."

The boat plunged, and Saro shifted the rudder without changing his beatific attitude. "I don't know what . . ." began Agostino, feeling more and more embarrassed and frightened. "I learn a lot of poetry . . . Carducci . . ."

"Ah yes, Carducci," repeated Saro mechanically. "Say a poem by Carducci."

"*Le fonti del Clitunno,*" suggested Agostino, terrified by that hand which would not let him go, and trying little by little to escape from it.

"Yes, *Le fonti del Clitunno,*" said Saro in a dreamy voice.

Ancor dal monte che di foschi ondeggia
frassini al vento mormoranti e lunge

began Agostino in a shaky voice.

The boat sped on, and Saro, still stretched at full length with closed eyes and his nose to the wind, began to move his head up and down as if scanning the lines. Agostino clung to poetry as the only means of escape from a conversation which he intuitively felt to be dangerous and compromising, and went on reciting slowly and clearly. Meanwhile, he kept trying to release his hand from those six imprisoning fingers; but they held him more tightly than ever. With terror he saw the end of the poem drawing near, and not knowing what to do he joined the first line of *Davanti a San Guido* on to the last line of *Fonti del Clitunno*. Here would be proof, if any were needed, that Saro didn't care a bit about the poetry but had something quite different in view; *what*, Agostino could not understand. The experiment succeeded. "*I cipressi che a Bolgheri alti e schietti*" suddenly began without Saro giving the faintest sign of noticing the change. Then Agostino broke off and said in an exasperated voice: "Let go, please," and tried at the same time to pull his hand quite away.

Saro started, and without letting go of him, opened his eyes and turned to look at him. He must have read such violent antipathy and such obvious terror on Agostino's face that he suddenly realized that his plan, for he certainly had a plan, was a complete failure. He slowly withdrew one finger after another from Agostino's aching hand and said in a low voice, as if speaking to himself: "What are you afraid of? We're going ashore now."

He dragged himself to his feet and pulled round the rudder. The boat turned its prow towards the shore.

Still rubbing his cramped fingers, Agostino got up from the bottom of the boat without a word and went to sit in the prow. By now the boat was not far from the shore. He could see the whole beach, the white stretch of sun-bleached sand which at that point was very wide, and beyond the beach the dense, brooding green of the pines. Rio was at a gap cut out in the high dunes, overhung by a greenish-blue mass of reeds. But before they got to Rio, Agostino saw a group of people on the beach, and from the center of this group there rose a long thread of black smoke. He turned to Saro, who was sitting in the stern controlling the rudder with one hand. "Is this where we get out?"

"Yes, this is Rio," replied Saro indifferently.

As the boat drew nearer and nearer to the shore Agostino saw the group gathered round the fire suddenly break up and start running down to the water's edge, and he at once saw that it was the boys. He could see them waving and probably calling out, but the wind carried their voices away. "Is it them?" he asked nervously.

"Yes, it's them," said Saro.

The boat drew nearer still and Agostino could clearly distinguish the boys. They were all there: Tortima, Berto, Sandro, and the others. And there was the Negro Homs, leaping along the shore and shouting with the others, a discovery which for some reason gave him a very uncomfortable feeling.

The boat made straight for the shore where with a rapid turn of the rudder, Saro brought it in crosswise, and throwing himself upon the sail clasped it in both arms and lowered it to the deck. The boat swung motionless in the shallow water. Saro took a small anchor from the bottom and threw it into the water. "Let's go ashore," he said. He climbed over the edge of the boat and waded through the water to meet the boys who were waiting on the beach.

Agostino saw the boys crowding around him and apparently offering him congratulations, which Saro received with a shake of his head. Still louder applause greeted his own arrival, and for a moment he was deceived into thinking they were welcoming him cordially. But he soon realized he was mistaken. Their laughter was mocking and sarcastic. Berto called out: "Good old Pisa, he enjoys going out for a sail," while Tortima, putting his fingers into his mouth, gave a rude whistle. The others imitated him. Even Sandro, usually so reserved, looked at him with contempt. As for the Negro, he did nothing but jump about around Saro, who went on ahead towards the fire the boys had lit on the beach. Surprised and vaguely alarmed, Agostino went and sat down among the others around the fire.

The boys had made a sort of rough oven out of damp compressed sand. Inside was a fire of dried pine cones, pine needles and twigs. Heaped up in the mouth of the oven were about a dozen ears of corn, slowly roasting.

Spread out on a newspaper near the fire were masses of fruit and a watermelon. "He's a fine one, is our Pisa," said Berto, when they had sat down. "You and Homs are buddies now, you ought to be sitting together . . . you're brothers, you two; he's black, you're white . . . that's all there is to it . . . and you both like going for a sail."

The Negro chuckled appreciatively. Saro was bending down to give the corncobs another turn in front of the fire. The others laughed derisively. Berto went so far as to give Agostino a push which sent him against Homs, so that for a moment their backs were touching; one chuckling with depraved self-satisfaction, the other bewildered and disgusted. "But I don't know what you mean," said Agostino suddenly. "I went out in the boat; what harm is there in that?"

"Aha, what harm is there in that? He went out in the boat. What harm is there in that?" repeated many scoffing voices. Some were holding their sides with laughter.

"Yes, indeed, what harm?" repeated Berto, turning to him again. "No harm at all! Why, Homs thinks it's grand, don't you Homs?"

The Negro assented ecstatically. And now the truth began dimly to dawn on Agostino, for he couldn't help seeing some connection between their taunts and Saro's odd behavior in the boat. "I don't know what you mean," he declared. "I didn't do anything wrong in that boat. Saro made me recite some poems, that's all."

"Ah, ah, those poems," was heard on all sides.

"Isn't it true what I say, Saro?" cried Agostino, red in the face.

Saro didn't say yes or no; he contented himself with smiling, watching him all the while with a certain curiosity. The boys interpreted his air of pretended indifference, which was really a cloak for his treachery and vanity, as giving the lie to Agostino. "Oh, of course," they all struck up together: "He asks the host if the wine is good, eh, Saro? That's a good one! Oh, Pisa, Pisa!" The Negro was having his revenge, and enjoying himself particularly. Agostino suddenly turned on him, trembling with rage, and said: "What is there to laugh at?"

"I'm not laughing," he replied, edging away.

"Now, don't you two quarrel," said Berto. "Saro will have to see about making you friends again." But the boys lost all interest when the issue seemed to be settling itself peacefully, and were already talking of other things. They were telling how they had crept into a field and stolen corn and fruit; how they had seen the enraged farmer coming towards them with a gun; how they had run away, and the farmer had fired salt at them without hitting anyone. Meanwhile, the ears were ready, beautifully toasted on the embers. Saro took them out of the oven and with his usual fatherly air parceled out one to each. Agostino took advantage of a moment when they were busy eating, and sprang across to Sandro, who was sitting a little apart, eating his corn grain by grain.

"I don't understand," he began. The other gave him a knowing look and Agostino felt he need say no more. "The Moor came by trolley," said Sandro slowly, "and he said you and Saro had gone sailing."

"But what harm is there in that?"

"It's no business of mine," replied Sandro, casting down his eyes. "It's up to you . . . you and the Moor. But as for Saro," he stopped and looked at Agostino.

"Well?"

"Well, I wouldn't have gone out alone with Saro."

"But why?"

Sandro looked carefully round him, then in a low voice gave the explanation which Agostino somehow expected, without being able to say why. "Ah," he said . . . but he could say no more and went back to the others. Squatting in the middle of the boys, with his imperturbable, good-natured head on one side, Saro had the air of a kind paterfamilias surrounded by his sons. But Agostino felt a deep loathing when he looked at him, greater in fact than he felt for the Negro. What made Agostino hate him more was his silence when appealed to, as if he wanted the boys to believe that what they had accused him of had really taken place. Besides, he could not help noticing that their scorn and derision had set a wide gulf between him and his companions—the same gulf which he now realized separated them from the Negro; only the Negro, instead of being humiliated and offended, as he himself was, seemed somehow to relish it. He tried more than once to turn the conversation on to the subject which so tormented him, but was met with laughter and an insulting indifference. Moreover, in spite of Sandro's only too clear explanation, he still could not quite grasp what had really happened. Everything seemed dark around him and within him, as if instead of beach, sea and sky, there were only shadows and vague, menacing forms.

Meanwhile, the boys had finished eating their roasted corn and tossed the bare cobs away in the sand. "Let's go swim at Rio," suggested someone, and the proposal was immediately accepted. Saro went with them, for it was agreed that he should take them all back to Vespucci in the boat.

As they walked along the sand Sandro left the others and came over to Agostino. "If you're offended with the Moor," he said, "why don't you put the fear of God into him?"

"How?" asked Agostino, in a discouraged tone.

"Give him a good hiding."

"But he's stronger than me," said Agostino, remembering the duel of the iron arm. "Unless you will help me."

"Why should I help you? It's your concern . . . yours and his." Sandro pronounced these words in such a way as to make it quite clear that he took the same view as the others as to the reason for Agostino's hatred of the Negro. A sense of terrible bitterness pierced Agostino to the heart. So Sandro, the only one who had shown him any kindness, believed that calumny too. After giving him this advice Sandro went off to rejoin the others, as if he were afraid of being seen with Agostino. From the beach they had passed through a forest of young pines; then they crossed a sandy path and entered the reed beds. The reeds grew thick and tall, and many had a white, plumy crest; the boys appeared and disappeared between their long green spears, slipping about on the damp earth and pushing the stiff, fibrous leaves aside with a dry, rustling sound. At last they came to a place where the reed bed widened around a low, muddy bank; at sight of them big frogs leaped from all sides into the opaque, glassy water; and here they began to undress, all together, under the eyes of Saro, who sat fully clothed on a rock overlooking the reeds, and appeared to be absorbed in his cigar, but was really watching them all the time through his half-closed eyelids. Agostino was ashamed to join them, but he was so afraid of being laughed at that he too began to unbutton his trousers, taking as long as he could about it and keeping an eye on the others. The rest seemed to be overjoyed at getting rid of their clothes, and bumped into each other shouting with glee. They looked very white against the background of green reeds, with an unpleasant, squalid whiteness from groin to belly, and this pallor only emphasized a sort of graceless and excessive muscularity which is especially to be found in manual workers. The graceful, well-proportioned Sandro, whose pubic hair was as fair as that of his head, was the only one who hardly seemed to be naked, perhaps because his skin was equally bronzed over his whole body; in any case his nakedness was quite different from that repulsive nakedness displayed in the public baths.

Before diving in the boys played all sorts of obscene pranks; opening their legs wide, poking and touching each other with a loose promiscuity which astounded Agostino, to whom this sort of thing was quite new. He was naked too, and his feet were black from the cold, filthy mud, but he would have liked to have hidden himself in the reeds, if only to escape the looks which Saro, who sat hunched up motionless like one of those huge frogs native to the reed bed, darted at him through half-closed eyes. But as usual his repugnance was less strong than the mysterious attraction which bound him to the gang; the two were so indissolubly mixed up together that it was impossible for him to distinguish between his horror and the pleasure which underlay it. The boys displayed themselves each in turn, boasting of their virility and bodily prowess. Tortima, the vainest of all, and in spite of his disproportionate strength the most squalid and plebeian looking, was so elated as to call out to Agostino: "Suppose I was to appear before your mother, one fine morning, naked like this, what would she say? Would she go along with me?"

"No," said Agostino.

"And I tell you that she'd come along at once," said Tortima. "She'd just give me one good look over, to see what I was good for, and then she'd say: 'Come along, Tortima, let's be off' " The gross absurdity of his suggestion made them all laugh, and at his cry: 'Come, Tortima, let's be off!' they flung themselves one after another into the water, diving in head over heels, just like the frogs whom their coming had disturbed.

The shore was so entirely surrounded by reeds that only a short stretch of the river was visible. But when they got into the middle of the stream they could see the whole river which, with an imperceptible motion of its dark, dense waters, flowed toward the mouth further down among the sandbanks. Up-stream the river continued between two lines of large silvery bushes which cast delightful reflections in the water; till one came to a little iron bridge, beyond which the reeds, pines and poplars were so dense as to prevent further passage. A red house, half-hidden among the trees, seemed to keep guard over this bridge.

For a moment Agostino felt happy, as he swam in that cold, powerful water which seemed to be trying to bear his legs away with it; he forgot for a moment all his wrongs and crosses. The boys swam about in all directions, their heads and arms emerging from the smooth green surface. Their voices resounded in the limpid, windless air; seen through the transparency of the water their bodies might have been the white shoots of plants blossoming out of the depths and moving hither and yon as the current drew them. Agostino swam up to Berto, who was not far off, and asked: "Are there many fish in this river?"

Berto looked at him and said: "What are you doing here? Why don't you keep Saro company?"

"I like swimming," replied Agostino, feeling miserable again; and he turned and swam away.

But he was not so strong or experienced a swimmer as the others; he soon got tired, and let the current carry him towards the mouth of the river. He had soon left the boys and their clamor behind him; the reeds grew thinner; through the clear, colorless water he could see the sandy bottom over which grey eddies flowed continually. At last he came to a deeper green pool, the stream's transparent eye as it were; and when he had passed this his feet touched the sand, and after struggling a moment against the force of the water he climbed out on to the bank. Where the stream flowed into the sea it curled round itself and formed a knot of water. The stream then lost its compactness and spread out fanwise, growing thinner and thinner till it was no more than a liquid veil thrown over the smooth sands. The tide flowed up into the river with tiny foam-flecked wavelets. Here and there in the watery sand, pools forgotten by the stream reflected the bright sky. Agostino walked about for a little, naked on the soft, mirroring sand, and enjoyed stamping on it with his feet and seeing the water suddenly rise to the surface and flood his footprints. There arose in him a vague and desperate desire to ford the river and walk on and on down the coast, leaving far behind him the boys, Saro, his mother and all the old life. Who knows whether, if he were to go straight ahead and never turn back, walking, walking on that soft white sand, he might not at last come to a country where none of these horrible things existed; a country where he would be welcomed as he longed to be, and where it would be possible for him to forget all he had learned and then learn it again without all that shame and horror, gently and naturally as he dimly felt that it might be possible. He gazed at the dark, remote horizon which enclosed the utmost boundaries of sea and shore and forest and felt drawn to that immensity as to something which might set him free from his bondage. The shouts of the boys racing across the shore to the boat roused him from his melancholy imaginings. One of them was waving his clothes in the air, and Berto was calling: "Pisa, we're off!" He shook himself and walked along at the edge of the sea to join the gang.

The boys were thronging together in the shallow water. Saro was warning them in fatherly tones that the boat was too small to hold them all, but he was clearly only teasing them. Screaming, the boys flung themselves like mad upon the boat; twenty hands at once clutched the sides, and in a twinkling the boat was filled with their gesticulating bodies. Some lay down on the bottom, others sat in a heap in the stern around the rudder, some in the prow, others on the seats; others again sat on the edge and let their feet dangle in the water. The boat really was too small for so many, and the water came almost to the top.

"We're all here then, are we?" said Saro in great good humor. He stood up, let out the sail, and the boat sped out to sea. The boys cheered its departure loudly.

But Agostino did not share their happy mood. He was looking out for a favorable opportunity to prove his innocence and remove the unjust stigma which oppressed him. He took advantage of a moment when the other boys were deep in some discussion, to scramble up to the Negro who was sitting alone in the bow and resembled in his blackness a new kind of figurehead. Squeezing one arm hard, Agostino demanded: "What did you go and say about me just now?"

It was a bad moment to choose, but it was Agostino's first opportunity of getting near the Negro who had taken good care to keep at a distance while they were on shore. "I spoke the truth," said Homs, without looking at him.

"What is the truth?"

The Negro's reply terrified Agostino. "It's no good your squeezing my arm like that. I only spoke the truth. But if you go on setting Saro against me I shall tell your mother everything. So look out, Pisa."

"What!" cried Agostino, seeing an abyss open beneath his feet. "What do you mean? Are you crazy? I . . . I . . ." He stammered, unable to follow up in words the frightful vision his imagination suddenly summoned up. But he had no time to continue. Shouts of derision broke out all over the boat.

"Look at them both side by side," laughed Berto. "Look at them! What a shame we haven't got a camera to take them both together." Agostino turned round, his face burning, and saw them all laughing. Even Saro was smiling under his mustache, as with half-closed eyes he puffed at his cigar. Agostino drew back from the Negro, as from the touch of a reptile, and with his arms around his knees sat watching the sea, his eyes full of tears.

On the horizon the sun was setting in clouds of fire above a violet sea, shot with pointed, glassy rays. The wind had risen and the boat made slow progress, listing heavily to one side under its load of boys. The prow of the boat was turned out to sea and seemed to be directed towards the dark profiles of far-off islands which rose among the red smoke of sunset like mountains at the end of a distant plateau. Saro, holding firmly between his knees the boys' stolen watermelon, split it open with his seaman's knife and cut off large slices which he distributed to them paternally. They passed the slices and bit into them greedily, spitting out the seeds and tearing off pieces of the flesh. Then one after another the sections of red, close-gnawed rind flew overboard into the sea. After the melon it was the turn of the wine flask, which Saro solemnly produced from under the stern. The bottle made the round of the boat, and even Agostino was obliged to swallow a mouthful. It was warm and strong and at once went to his head. When the empty bottle had returned to its place Tortima sang an indecent song, and they all joined in the refrain. Between verses they pressed Agostino to sing too, for they had noticed his black mood; but no one spoke to him except to tease him and incite him to sing. Agostino felt within him a heavy weight of pent-up grief which the windy sea and magnificent fires of sunset on the violet waters only made more bitter and unbearable. It seemed to him horribly unjust that it was on such a sea and under such a sky that a boat like theirs should be sailing, so crowded with malice, cruelty, falsehood and corruption. That boat, overflowing with boys gesticulating like obscene monkeys, with the fat and blissful Saro at the helm, was to him an incredible and melancholy sight in the midst of all that beauty. At moments he wished it would sink; he would have liked to die himself, he thought, and no longer be infected and stained by all that impurity. How far away seemed the morning when he had for the first time looked upon the red awning of the Vespucci Baths; far away and belonging to an age already dead. Each time the boat rose on an unusually high wave they gave a yell which made him shudder; each time the Negro addressed him with his revolting and hypocritically slavish humility, he tried not to listen and drew back still further into the prow. He was dimly conscious of having on that fatal day entered upon an age of difficulties and miseries from which he could see no way of escape. The boat made a long trip, going as far as the port and then turning back again. When they at last touched land Agostino ran off without saying good-bye to anyone. But he had not gone far before he slackened his pace and looking back saw the boys helping Saro to pull the boat up on the beach. It was already getting dark.

THAT day was the beginning of a dark and troubled time for Agostino. On that day his eyes had been opened for him by force, but what he had learned was too much for him, a burden greater than he could bear. It was not so much their novelty as the quality of the things he had learned which oppressed and poisoned him; they were too appalling and too portentous for him to assimilate. He thought, for example, that after that day's disclosures about his mother his relations with her would have become clarified; that the uneasiness, distaste and even disgust which, after Saro's revelations, her caresses awoke in him would somehow, as if by enchantment, be resolved and reconciled in a new and serene consciousness. But it was not so; the uneasiness, distaste and disgust remained, rising in the first instance from the shock and bewilderment to his filial love occasioned by his obscure realization of his mother's femininity, and after that morning in Saro's tent rising from a bitter sense of guilty curiosity which his traditional and abiding respect for his mother rendered intolerable to him. At first he had unconsciously tried to break loose from that affection by an unjustified dislike, but now it seemed to him a duty to separate his newly won reasoned knowledge from his sense of blood relationship with someone whom he wanted to consider only as a woman. He felt that if only he could see in his mother what Saro and the boys did—just a beautiful woman—then all his unhappiness would disappear; and he tried with all his might to seek out occasions which would confirm him in this belief. But the only result was that his former reverence and affection gave place to cruelty and sensuality.

At home his mother did not hide herself from him any more than she had before, and was unaware of any change in his attitude towards her. As his mother, she had no sense of shame; but to Agostino it seemed that she was wantonly provocative. He would hear her calling him, and would go to her room to find her at her toilet, in negligee and with her breasts half-uncovered. Or he would wake to find her bending over him to give him his morning kiss, with her dressing gown open so that he could clearly see the shape of her body through her fragile, crumpled nightgown. She would go to and fro in front of him as if he were not there; putting on or taking off her stockings, putting on her clothes, applying perfume or make-up; and all those acts which Agostino had once thought so natural now seemed to him the outward and visible signs of a much more embracing and more dangerous reality, so that his mind was torn between curiosity and pain. He kept saying to himself: "She's only a woman," with the objective indifference of a connoisseur. But a moment later, unable to endure either her maternal unselfconsciousness or his own watchfulness, he would have liked to shout: "Cover yourself up, go away, don't let me see you any more, I'm not the same as I used to be." But his hope of judging his mother as a woman and nothing more almost immediately suffered shipwreck. He soon saw that even if she had become a woman she remained in his eyes all the more his mother; and he realized that the cruel sense of shame which he had at first attributed to the novelty of his feelings would now never leave him. He saw in a flash that she would always remain for him the person he had loved with such a free and pure love; she would always mix with her most feminine gestures those purely affectionate ones which for so long had been the only ones he knew; never would he be able to separate his new conception of her from his now wounded memory of her former dignity. He did not for a moment doubt that the facts of her relationship with the young man really were as reported by the boys in Saro's tent. And he wondered secretly at the change which had taken place in him. At first he had only felt jealousy of his mother and antipathy towards the young man; both feelings being rather veiled and indefinite. But now, in his effort to remain objective and calm, he would have wished to feel sympathy for the young man and indifference towards his mother. But this sympathy seemed somehow to make him an accomplice, and his indifference to make him indiscreet. He very seldom went out with them now on the raft, for he generally contrived to avoid being invited. But whenever he went he was conscious of studying the young man's gestures and words almost as if he wanted him to overstep the limits of permitted social gallantry, and of studying his mother almost in the hope of having his suspicions confirmed. At the same time these sentiments were intolerable to him because they were the exact opposite of what he wanted to feel, and he would almost have liked to feel again the pity which his mother's foolish behavior had once aroused in him; it was more human and affectionate than his present merciless dissection.

Those days of inner conflict left him with a confused sense of impurity. He felt that he had exchanged his former state of innocence, not for the manly calm he had hoped for, but a dark, indeterminate state in which he found no compensating advantages, but only fresh perplexities in addition to the old. What was the good of seeing clearly, if this clarity only brought with it deeper shades of darkness? Sometimes he wondered how older boys than himself managed to go on loving their mother when they knew what he knew; and he concluded that such knowledge must at once destroy their filial affection, whereas in his own case the one did not banish the other, but they existed side by side in a dreary tangle.

As sometimes happens, the place which was the scene of these discoveries and conflicts—his home—became almost intolerable to him. The sea, the sun, the crowd of bathers, the presence of many other women at least distracted him and deadened his sensibilities. But here, between the four walls of his home, alone with his mother, he felt exposed to every kind of temptation, beset by every kind of contradiction. On the beach his mother was one among many other sun bathers; here she seemed overpowering and unique. Just as on a small stage the actors seem larger than life, so here every gesture and word of hers stood out with extraordinary definition. Agostino had a very lively and adventurous sensibility in regard to the familiar things of his home. When he was a child every passage, every nook and corner, every room had had for him a mysterious and incalculable character; they were places in which you might make the strangest discoveries and live through the most fantastic adventures. But now, after his meeting with those boys in the red tent, these adventures and discoveries were of a quite different kind, so that he did not know whether to be more attracted or frightened by them. Formerly he used to imagine ambushes, shadows, spirits, voices in the furniture and in the walls; but now his fancy, even more actively than in his exuberant childhood, attached itself to the new realities with which the walls, the furniture, the very air of the house seemed to him to be impregnated. And in place of his old innocent excitement which his mother's good-night kiss and dreamless sleep could always calm, he was tormented by a burning and shameful curiosity which at night grew to giant proportions and seemed to find in darkness more food for its impure fire.

Everywhere in the house he seemed to spy out traces of a woman's presence, the only woman whom he had ever known intimately; and that woman was his mother. When he was with her he felt as if he were somehow mounting guard over her; when he approached her door he felt he was spying on her; if he touched her clothes he felt as if it was herself he was touching, for she had worn these clothes, they had held her body. At night he dreamed with his eyes open, and had agonizing nightmares. He would sometimes imagine himself to be a child again, afraid of every sound, of every shadow, and would spring up to run and take refuge in his mother's bed; but as soon as his feet touched the ground he realized, sleepy and bewildered though he was, that his fear was only a cunning mask for curiosity and that directly he was in his mother's arms his nocturnal vision would reveal its true purpose. Or he would wake suddenly and wonder whether by chance the young man of the raft were there at that very moment in his mother's room on the other side of the wall. Certain sounds seemed to confirm this suspicion, others to contradict it; he would toss restlessly in bed for a while, and at last, without the smallest idea how he had got there, would find himself in the passage in his nightshirt, listening and spying outside his mother's room. Once he could not resist the temptation of going in without knocking, and he stood motionless in the middle of the room in the diffused moonlight which entered through the open window, his eyes fixed on the bed where he could distinguish his mother's black hair spread out over the pillow, and her long, softly rounded limbs. "Is that you, Agostino?" she asked, waking up. Without saying a word he turned and hurried back to his room.

His reluctance to remain alone with his mother drove him more and more to Vespucci. But here other torments awaited him, and made the place as odious to him as his home. The boys' attitude towards him after he had been out alone in the boat with Saro had not changed at all; it had in fact assumed a definite and final form, as if founded on an unshakable conviction. For he was the one who had accepted that signal and sinister favor from Saro; it was impossible to get that idea out of their mind. So that, in addition to the jealousy and contempt they had felt for him from the first on account of his being rich, was now added another source of contempt . . . his supposed depravity. And in the minds of those young savages the one seemed to justify the other, the one to grow out of the other. They seemed by their humiliating and cruel treatment of him to imply that he was rich and therefore naturally depraved. Agostino was quick to perceive the subtle relation between these two charges, and he dimly felt that they were making him pay for being different from them and superior to them. His social difference and superiority were expressed in his clothes and his talk about the luxury of his home, in his tastes and manner of speech; his moral difference and superiority impelled him to refute the charge of having had any such relations with Saro, and kept showing itself in open disgust at the boys' manners and habits. So at last, prompted by the humiliating position in which he found himself rather than exercising any definite choice of his own, he decided to be what they seemed to want him to be . . . that is, just like themselves. He began wearing his oldest and dirtiest clothes, to the great surprise of his mother, who noticed that he no longer took any pride in his appearance; he made a point of never mentioning his luxurious home, and he took an ostentatious pleasure in ways and habits which up to that time had disgusted him. But worst of all, and it needed a great effort to nerve himself to it, one day when they were making their usual jokes about his going out alone with Saro, he said that he was tired of denying it, and that what they accused him of had really happened, and that he didn't care whether they knew it or not. Saro was startled by these assertions, but perhaps from fear of exposing himself did not deny them. The boys were also very much surprised to hear him admitting the truth of gossip which had seemed to torment him so much before. He was so timid and shy that they would never have given him credit for so much courage, but they very soon began raining down questions on him as to what had really happened; and then he lost heart, got red in the face and refused to say another word. Naturally the boys interpreted his silence in their own way, as being due to shame and not, as it really was, to his ignorance and incapacity to invent. And the usual load of taunts and low jokes became heavier than ever

But in spite of this breakdown he really had changed. Without being conscious of it himself, without really trying to, he had, by dint of spending so much time with the boys every day, ended by becoming very like them, and had lost his old tastes without really acquiring any new ones. More than once, in a mood of revolt against Vespucci, he had joined in the more innocent games at Speranza, seeking out his playmates of earlier in the summer. But how colorless and dull those nicely brought-up boys now seemed to him, how boring their regulation walks under the eye of parents or tutors, how insipid their school gossip, their stamp collections, books of adventure and such-like. The fact is that the company of the gang, their talk about women, their thieving expeditions in the orchards, even the acts of oppression and violence of which he had himself been a victim, had transformed him and made him intolerant of his former friendships. It was during this time that something happened which brought this home to him more strongly. One morning when he arrived late at Vespucci he found no one there. Saro was off on some business of his own, and there were no boys to be seen. He wandered gloomily to the water's edge and seated himself on a float. Suddenly, as he was watching the beach in the hope of seeing at least Saro come in sight, a man and a boy about two years younger than himself appeared. He was a small man, with short, fat legs under a protruding stomach, a round face and pointed nose confined by pince-nez. He looked like a civil servant or professor. The boy was thin and pale, in a suit too big for him, and was hugging a large and evidently new leather ball to his chest. Holding his son by the hand, the man came up to Agostino and looked at him doubtfully for some time. At last he asked if it was possible to go for a row.

"Of course," replied Agostino, without hesitation.

The man considered him rather suspiciously over the top of his glasses, then asked how much it would cost to go out for an hour on a bathing raft. Agostino knew the prices and told him. Then he realized that the man had mistaken him for the bath man's son or for one of his boys, and that somehow flattered him. "Very well," said the man, "we will go."

Agostino didn't need telling twice. He at once took the rough pine log which served as roller, and placed it under the prow of the boat. Then, grasping the ends of the two floats in both hands, his strength redoubled by this singular spur to his pride, he pushed the raft into the water. He helped the boy and his father to get on, sprang after them and seized the oars.

For a while Agostino rowed without speaking. At that early hour the sea was quite empty. The boy hugged his ball to his chest and kept his pale eyes fixed on Agostino. The man sat awkwardly, with knees apart to make room for his paunch. He kept turning his fat neck to look about him, and seemed to be enjoying the outing. At last he asked Agostino who he was, the bath man's son, or employed by him. Agostino replied that he was employed by him. "And how old are you?" asked the man.

"Thirteen," replied Agostino.

"There," said the man, turning to his son, "this boy is almost the same age as you, and he's already at work." Then to Agostino: "And do you go to school?"

"I should like to, but how can I, sir?" he answered, assuming the hypocritical tone which he had heard the boys put on when asked a question like that. "We've got to live, sir."

"There, you see," said the father to his son. "This boy can't go to school because he has to work, and you have the face to make a fuss about your lessons."

"There's a lot of us in the family," said Agostino, rowing vigorously, "and we all work."

"And how much can you earn a day?" asked the man.

"It depends," replied Agostino. "If many people come, about twenty or thirty lire."

"Which of course you give to your father," interposed the man.

"Of course," replied Agostino, without a moment's hesitation, "except what I make in tips."

This time the man didn't think it necessary to point him out as an example to his son, but he nodded his head approvingly. His son said nothing, but hugged his ball still closer and kept his pale, watery eyes fixed on Agostino. "Would you like to have a leather ball like that, boy?" the man suddenly asked Agostino. Now Agostino had two identical balls, which had been lying about for a long time in his room with his other toys. But he said: "Of course I should, but how am I to get one? We have to buy necessities first." The man turned to his son and said to him, probably half in fun: "There now, Peter, give your ball to this boy who hasn't got one." The boy looked first at his father and then at Agostino, and greedily hugged his ball tighter; but still he didn't say a word. "Don't you want to?" asked his father gently. "Don't you want to?"

"It's my ball," said the boy.

"Yes, it's yours, but if you like you may give it away," persisted the father. "This poor boy has never had one in all his life; now, don't you want to give it up to him?"

"No," said his son emphatically.

"Never mind," interposed Agostino at this point, with a sanctimonious smile, "I don't really want it. I shouldn't have time to play with it . . . it's different for him."

The father smiled at these words, pleased at having found such a useful object lesson for his son. "He's a better boy than you," he went on, stroking his son's head. "He's poor, but he doesn't want to take away your ball, he leaves it to you; but whenever you want to grumble and make a fuss, I hope you'll remember that there are lots of boys like this in the world, who have to work, and who have never had balls or any toys of their own."

"It's my ball," repeated the boy obstinately.

"Yes, it's yours," sighed his father, absent-mindedly. He looked at his watch and said in a tone of command: "It's time we went back; take us in, boy." Without a word Agostino turned the prow towards the beach.

As they approached the shore he saw Saro standing in the water watching his maneuvers attentively, and he was afraid the bath man would give him away. But Saro didn't say a word; perhaps he understood, perhaps he didn't care; he gravely helped Agostino pull the boat up the beach. "This is for you," said the man, giving Agostino the sum agreed on and something over. Agostino took the money and gave it to Saro. "But I'm going to keep the tip," he added, with an air of self-satisfied bravado. Saro said nothing; scarcely even smiling, he put the money inside the sash bound around his stomach and walked off slowly across the beach to his hut.

This little incident gave Agostino a definite feeling of not belonging any more to the world in which boys of that sort existed, and by now he had got so used to living with the poor that the hypocrisy of any other kind of life bored him. At the same time he felt regretfully that he wasn't really like the boys of the gang. He was still much too sensitive. If he had really been one of them, he thought sometimes, he would not have suffered so much from their coarse and clumsy jokes. So it seemed that he had lost his first estate without having succeeded in winning another.

ONE day, towards the end of the summer, Agostino went with the boys to the pine woods to chase birds and look for mushrooms. This was what he enjoyed most of all their exploits. They entered the forest and walked for miles upon its soft soil along natural aisles, between the red pillars of the tree trunks, looking up in the sky to see if somewhere between those tall trunks there was anything moving among the pine needles. Then Berto or Tortima or Sandro, who was the most skillful of all, would stretch the elastic of his slingshot and aim a sharp stone in the direction they thought they had seen a movement. Sometimes a sparrow with a broken wing would come hurtling down, and go fluttering lamely along with pitiful little chirps till one of the boys seized it and twisted its neck between his fingers. But more often the chase was fruitless, and the boys would go wandering on deeper and deeper into the forest, their heads thrown back and their eyes fixed on some point far above them; going ever farther and farther till at last the undergrowth began and a tangle of thorny bushes took the place of bare, soft soil covered with dry husks. And with the undergrowth began their hunt for fungi. It had been raining for a day or two and the leaves of the undergrowth were still glistening with wet, and the ground was damp and covered with fresh green shoots. In the thick of the bushes . . . there were the yellow fungi, glittering with moisture; sometimes magnificent single ones, sometimes families of little ones. The boys put their fingers through the brambles and picked them delicately, holding the head between two fingers and taking care to bring the stalk away too, with earth and moss still clinging to it. Then they threaded them on long, pointed sprigs of broom. Wandering thus from patch to patch of undergrowth, they would collect several kilos for Tortima's dinner, for he, being the strongest, confiscated their finds. That day their harvest had been a rich one, for after wandering about a good deal they had found some virgin undergrowth where the fungi were growing closely packed together in their bed of moss. It was getting late before they had even half-explored this undergrowth; so they began to tramp slowly homeward, with several long spits laden with fungi and two or three birds.

They generally followed a path which led straight down to the shore; but this evening they were led farther and farther in pursuit of a teasing sparrow which kept fluttering along among the low boughs and continually gave the illusion of being just within reach, so that they ended by walking the whole length of the forest, which to the east came to an end just behind the town. It was dusk as they emerged from the last pine trees on to the piazza of a remote suburb, with rubbish heaps and thistles and broom scattered about and a few ill-defined paths winding over it. Stunted oleanders grew at intervals around the edge; there were no pavements, and the dusty gardens of the few little villas which bordered it alternated with waste ground enclosed by bits of fencing. These little villas were placed at intervals all round the piazza and the wide expanse of sky over the great square added to the impression of loneliness and squalor.

The boys cut diagonally across the piazza, walking two and two like a religious order. At the end of the procession came Tortima and Agostino. Agostino was carrying two long spits of fungi and Tortima held a couple of sparrows in his great hands, their bloody heads dangling.

When they had reached the far end of the piazza Tortima nudged Agostino with his elbow and, pointing to one of the little villas, said cheerfully: "Do you see that? Do you know what that is?"

Agostino looked. The villa was very like all the others; a little bigger perhaps, with three stories and a sloping slate roof. Its façade was gloomy and smoke-grimed, with white shutters tightly closed; while the dense trees in the garden almost hid it from view. The garden did not look very big; the wall around it was covered with ivy, and through the gate one could see a short path with bushes on either side, and a double-paneled door under an old-fashioned porch. "There's no one there," said Agostino, stopping.

"No one, eh?" laughed the other; and he explained to Agostino in a few words who it was lived there. Agostino had several times heard the boys talking about houses where women lived alone, and how they shut themselves in all day, and at night were ready to welcome anyone who came, in return for money; but he had never seen one of these houses before. Tortima's words roused in him to the full the sense of strangeness and bewilderment which he had felt when first he heard them discussing it. And now as then he could hardly believe that there really existed a community so singular in its generosity as to dispense impartially to all that love which seemed to him so far away and so hard to come by; so he now looked with incredulous eyes on the little villa, as if he hoped to read on its walls some trace of the incredible life that went on inside it.

Compared with his imaginary picture of rooms on each of which a naked woman shed her radiance, the house looked singularly old and grimy. "Oh yes," he said, with pretended indifference, but his heart had already begun to beat faster.

"Yes," said Tortima, "it's the most expensive in the town." And he added a number of details about the place and the number of women, the people who went there and the time you were allowed to stay. This information was almost displeasing to Agostino, substituting as it did sordid details for the confused, barbaric image he had formed when he first heard tell of these forbidden places. But assuming a tone of idle curiosity he put a great many questions to his companion. For, after the first moment of surprise and disappointment, an idea had suddenly sprung up in his mind and soon laid fast hold of him. Tortima, who seemed to be well informed, gave him all the information he needed. Deep in conversation they crossed the piazza and joined the others on the esplanade. It was now almost dark and the party broke up. Agostino gave his fungi to Tortima and started home.

The idea which had come to him was clear and simple enough, however complicated and obscure its origin. He had made up his mind to go to that villa this very night and sleep with one of the women. This was not just a vague desire, it was an absolutely firm, almost desperate resolution. He felt that this was the only way he could escape from the obsession that had caused him such intense suffering all that summer. If he could only possess one of those women, he said to himself, it would forever prove the boys' calumny to have been ridiculous, and at the same time sever the thin thread of perverted and troubled sensuality which still bound him to his mother. Though he did not confess it to himself, his most urgent aim was to feel himself forever independent of his mother's love. A simple but significant fact had convinced him of this necessity, only that very day.

Up to now he and his mother had slept in separate rooms; but that night a friend of his mother's was arriving to spend a week with them. As the house was small it had been arranged that their guest should have Agostino's room, while a cot was to be made up for him in his mother's room. That very morning he had been disgusted to see the cot set up beside his mother's, which was still unmade and covered with bedclothes. His clothing and books and washing things had been carried in with the cot.

The fact of sleeping together only made Agostino hate still more that promiscuity with his mother which was already so hateful to him. He thought this new and still closer intimacy must suddenly reveal to him, without hope of escape, all that up to now he had only dimly suspected. Quickly, quickly he must find an antidote, and set up between his mother and himself the image of another woman to whom he could turn his thoughts if not his eyes. And the image which was to screen him from his mother's nakedness, and which would restore her dignity by removing her femininity . . . one of those women in the villa on the piazza was to supply that image.

How he was to get himself received in that house and how he would choose the woman and go off with her were matters to which Agostino did not give a thought—indeed, even if he had wanted to, he would never have been able to picture it. In spite of Tortima's information, the house and its inmates and everything belonging to it were surrounded by a dense atmosphere of improbability, as if one were not dealing with reality but with the most daring hypothesis which might at the last moment prove fallacious. The success of his undertaking depended on a logical calculation; if there was a house, then there were women too, and if there were women there was the possibility of meeting one of them. But it was not quite clear to him that the house and the women really were there; and this was not so much because he doubted Tortima's word as because he was totally lacking in terms of comparison. Nothing he had ever done or seen bore the faintest resemblance to what he was about to undertake. Like a poor savage who has heard about the palaces of Europe, and can only picture them as a slightly larger version of his own thatched hut, so he, in trying to picture those women and their caresses, could only think, with slight variations, of his mother; the love making could only be conjecture and vague desire.

But, as so often happens, his very inexperience led him to busy himself with practical aspects of the question, as if once these were settled he could also solve its complex unreality. He was particularly worried by the question of money. Tortima had explained to him in great detail exactly how much he would have to pay and to whom; and yet he could not quite grasp it. What was the relation between money, which is generally used for acquiring quite definite objects with recognizable qualities, and a woman's caresses, a woman's naked flesh? Was there really a price, and was that price really fixed, and not different in each particular case? The idea of giving money in exchange for that shameful and forbidden pleasure seemed to him cruel and strange, an insult which the giver might find pleasant but which must be painful for the one who received it. Was it really true that he would have to pay the money directly to the woman, and in her very presence? He somehow felt he ought to hide it and leave her with the illusion of a disinterested relationship. And then, wasn't the sum Tortima had mentioned too small? No money would be enough, he thought, to pay for such an experience . . . the end of one period of his life and the beginning of another.

Faced with these doubts he decided to keep strictly to what Tortima had told him, even if it turned out to be false, for he had nothing else on which to base his plan of action. He had found out from his friend how much it cost to visit the villa, and the figure did not seem higher than the amount he had been saving for a long time in his terra-cotta money box. With the small coins and paper money it contained he must surely be able to get the amount together, and it might even prove to be more. His plan was to take the money out of the money box, then wait till his mother had gone to the station to meet her friend, when he would go out in his turn, fetch Tortima and set off with him to the villa. He must have enough money for Tortima too, for he knew him to be poor and certainly not in the least disposed to do him a favor unless he was going to get something out of it himself.

This was his plan, and though it still seemed to him desperately remote and improbable he resolved to prepare for it with the same care and certainty as if it had only been an outing in a boat or some expedition into the pine woods.

EAGER and excited, freed for the first time from the poison of remorse and impotence, he almost ran all the way home from the distant piazza. The front door was locked, but the french windows of the drawing room stood open, and through them came the sound of music. His mother was at the piano. He went in; the two subdued lights over the piano lit up her face while the rest of the room was in darkness. His mother was sitting on the piano stool, and beside her, on another, sat the young man of the raft. It was the first time that Agostino had seen him in their house, and a sudden presentiment took his breath away. His mother seemed to divine his presence, for she turned her head with a calm gesture of unconscious coquetry, a coquetry of which Agostino felt the young man to be the object rather than himself. She at once stopped playing when she saw him, and called him to her. "Agostino, what do you mean by coming in at this hour? Come here."

He went slowly up to the piano, full of revolt and embarrassment. His mother drew him to her and put her arm around him. He noticed that his mother's eyes were extraordinarily bright and young and sparkling. Laughter seemed to be on the brink of bubbling up through her lips, making her teeth glitter. She quite frightened him by the impetuosity, almost violence, with which she drew him to her, as if she were trembling with joy. He was sure that these manifestations had nothing to do with him personally. And they reminded him strangely of his own excitement of a few minutes before, as he ran through the streets in his eagerness to fetch his savings and go with Tortima to the villa and possess a woman.

"Where have you been?" his mother went on, in a voice which was at once tender, cruel and gay. "Where have you been all this time, you naughty boy?" Agostino made no reply; he did not feel his mother really expected one. That was just how she sometimes spoke to the cat. The young man was leaning forward, clasping his knees with both hands, his cigarette between two fingers, and gazing at his mother with eyes as sparkling and smiling as her own. "Where have you been?" repeated his mother. "How naughty of you to play truant like that." She rumpled up his hair on his forehead and then smoothed it again with her warm, slender hand, with a tender but irresistible violent caress. "Isn't he a handsome boy?" she said proudly, turning to the young man.

"As handsome as his mother," the young man replied. She smiled pathetically at this simple compliment. Full of shame and irritation, Agostino made an effort to free himself from her embrace. "Go and wash yourself," said his mother, "and make haste, because we are soon going in to supper." Agostino bowed slightly to the young man and left the room. Behind him, he immediately heard the music taken up again at the very point where he had interrupted it.

But once in the passage he stood still and listened to the sounds his mother's fingers were drawing from the keys. The passage was dark, and at the end of it he could see through the open door into the brightly lit kitchen, where the cook, dressed in white, was bustling about between the table and the kitchen range. His mother went on playing, and the music sounded to Agostino gay, tumultuous, sparkling, exactly like the expression in her eyes while she held him to her side. Perhaps that really was the character of the music, or perhaps his mother read into it some of her own fire and sparkle and vivacity. The whole house resounded to the music, and Agostino found himself thinking that out in the road lots of people must be stopping to listen, wondering at the scandalous wantonness which seemed to pour from every note.

Then, all at once, in the middle of a chord, the sounds stopped, and Agostino was convinced—he could not have told how—that the passion which had found expression in the music had suddenly found another outlet. He took two steps forward, and stood still on the threshold of the drawing room. What he saw did not much surprise him. The young man was standing up, and kissing his mother on the lips. She was bending backward over the low stool, which was too small to hold her body; one hand was still on the keyboard and the other was round the young man's neck. Even in the dim light he could see how her body was arched as it fell backward, with her chest thrust forward, one leg folded behind her, and the other stretched out toward the pedal. In contrast to her attitude of passionate surrender, the young man preserved his usual easy and graceful carriage. As he stood, he held one arm round the woman's neck, but apparently more from fear lest she might fall over than from any deep emotion. His other arm hung at his side and he still had a cigarette between his fingers. His white-trousered legs, planted far apart, expressed deliberation and complete mastery of the situation.

The kiss lasted a long time and it seemed to Agostino that whenever the young man wanted to interrupt it his mother clung to his lips more insatiably than ever. He really could not help feeling that she was hungry . . . famished for that kiss, like someone who has been starved too long. Then, at a casual movement of her hand two or three solemn, sweet notes sounded in the room. Suddenly they sprang apart. Agostino took a step forward and said: "Mamma." The young man wheeled about, and standing with his legs apart and his hands in his pockets, pretended to look out the window.

"Agostino!" said his mother.

Agostino went to her. She was breathing so violently that he could distinctly see her breasts rising and falling through her silk dress. Her eyes were brighter than ever, her mouth was half-open, her hair in disorder; and one soft, pointed lock, like a live snake, hung against her cheek.

"What is it, Agostino?" she repeated, in a low, broken voice, doing her best to arrange her hair. Agostino felt a sudden oppression of pity mingled with distaste. He would have liked to cry out to her: "Calm yourself, don't pant like that . . . don't speak to me in that voice." But instead, he put on a childish voice and said, with exaggerated eagerness: "Mamma, can I break open my money box? I want to buy a book."

"Yes, dear," she answered, putting out a hand to stroke his brow. At the touch of her hand Agostino could not help starting back. His movement was so slight as to be almost imperceptible, but to him it seemed so violent that he felt every one must notice it. "Very well then, I'll break it," he said. And he left the room quickly, without waiting for a reply. The sand on the stairs made a gritty sound as he ran up to his room. The idea of the money box had really only been a pretext; the fact was he didn't know what to say when he saw his mother looking like that. It was dark in his room; the money box was on a table at the far end. Through the open window a street lamp lit up its pink belly and great black smiling mouth. He turned on the light, picked up the money box and flung it on the ground with an almost hysterical violence. It broke at once and from the wide opening poured a quantity of money of every description. There were several notes mixed with the coins. He went down on hands and knees and frantically counted the money. His fingers were trembling and, while he counted, the image of those two down in the drawing room kept getting mixed up with the money that was lying scattered over the floor—his mother, hanging backwards over the piano stool, and the young man bending over her. But when he had finished counting he discovered that the money did not amount to the sum he needed.

What was he to do? It flashed through his mind that he might take it from his mother, for he knew where she kept it, and nothing would have been easier; but this idea revolted him and he decided simply to ask her for it. But what excuse could he make? He suddenly thought of one, but at that moment he heard the gong sounding for supper. He hastily hid his treasure in a drawer and went downstairs.

His mother was already at table. The window was wide open and great velvety moths flew in from the courtyard and beat their wings against the white lampshade. The young man had gone and his mother had again assumed her usual dignified serenity. Agostino, as he looked at her, wondered why her mouth bore no trace of the kisses which had been pressed on it a few minutes before, just as he had wondered that first time, when she went out on the raft with the young man. He could not have defined what feelings this thought awoke in him. A sense of pity for his mother, to whom that kiss seemed to be so disturbing and so precious; and at the same time a strong feeling of repulsion, not so much for what he had seen as for the memory which remained with him. He would have liked to expel that memory, to forget it altogether. How was it possible that such troublous and changing impressions could enter through one's eyes? He foresaw that the sight would be forever stamped on his memory.

When they had finished, his mother rose from the table and went upstairs. Agostino thought he would never find such an opportune moment to ask for the money. He followed her up and went into her room with her. His mother sat down at the dressing-table and silently studied her face in the glass.

"Mamma," said Agostino.

"What is it?" she asked absentmindedly.

"I want twenty lire."

"What for?"

"To buy a book."

"But didn't you say you were going to break open your money box?" asked his mother, gently passing the powder puff over her face.

Agostino purposely made a childish excuse.

"Yes, but if I break it I shan't have any money left. I want to buy a book without opening my money box.

His mother laughed fondly. "What a baby you are." She studied herself a moment more in the glass, then she said: "You'll find my purse in the bag on my bed. Take out twenty lire, and put the purse back again." Agostino went to the bed, opened the bag, took out the purse and took twenty lire from it. Then clutching the two notes in his hand he flung himself on the cot beside his mother's. She had finished her make-up and came over to him. "What are you going to do now?" "I'm going to read this book," he said, taking a book of adventures at random from the bed table, and opening it at an illustration.

"Very well, but remember before you go to sleep to put out the light." His mother was still moving about the room, doing one thing and another. Agostino lay watching her, with his head pillowed on his arm. He obscurely felt that she had never been so beautiful as on that evening. Her dress of glossy white silk showed off brilliantly her brown coloring and the rich rose of her complexion. By an unconscious reflowering of her former character she seemed to have recovered all the sweet, majestic serenity of bearing she used to have; but with an indefinable breath of happiness. She was tall, but Agostino had never seen her look so imposing before. Her presence seemed to fill the room. White in the shadow of the room, she moved majestically about, with head erect on her beautiful neck, her black eyes calm and concentrated under her smooth brow. Then she put out all the lights except above the bed table, and bent down to kiss her son. Agostino drank in again the perfume he knew so well, and as he touched her neck with his lips he could not help wondering if those women . . . out there in the villa . . . would be as beautiful and smell as sweet.

Left alone, Agostino waited about ten minutes to give his mother time to have gone. Then he got up from the cot, put out the light, and tiptoed into the next room. He felt about in the dark for the table by the window, opened the drawer and filled his pockets with coins and notes. He felt with his hand in every corner of the drawer to see if it was really empty, and left the room.

When he was on the road he began to run. Tortima lived at the other end of the town, in the caulkers' and sailors' quarter, and though the town was small he had a long way to go. He chose the dark alleys bordering on the pine woods, and walking fast and occasionally running, he went straight ahead until he saw, appearing between the houses, the masts of the sailboats in the dry dock. Tortima's house was just above the dock, beyond the movable iron bridge which spanned the canal leading to the harbor. By day this was a forgotten, dilapidated spot with tumble-down warehouses and shops bordering its wide, deserted, sun-baked quays, pervaded by the smell of fish and tar, with green, oily water, motionless cranes and barges laden with shingle. But now the night made it like every other part of the town, and only a ship whose bulging sides and masts overhung the footpath, revealed the presence of the harbor water lying deep in between the houses. Agostino crossed the bridge and headed toward a row of houses on the opposite side of the canal. Here and there a street lamp irregularly lit the walls of these little houses. Agostino stopped in front of an open lighted window, from which came the sounds of voices and clatter of plates, as if they were having a meal. Putting his fingers to his mouth he gave one loud and two soft whistles, which was the signal agreed upon between the boys of the gang. Almost at once someone appeared at the window. "It's me, it's Pisa," said Agostino, in a low, timid voice. "I'm coming," answered Tortima. He came down, still eating his last mouthful, red in the face from the wine he had been drinking. "I've come to go to that villa," said Agostino. "I've got the money here . . . enough for both of us." Tortima swallowed hard and looked at him. "That villa the other side of the piazza," Agostino repeated. "Where the women are."

"Ah," said Tortima, understanding at last. "You've been thinking it over. Bravo, Pisa. I'll be with you in a moment." He ran off and Agostino walked up and down, waiting for him, his eyes fixed on Tortima's window. He was kept waiting a long time, but at last Tortima reappeared. Agostino scarcely recognized him.

He had always seen him as a big boy with trousers tucked up, or half-naked on the beach and in the sea. Now he saw before him a young working man in dark holiday clothes: long trousers, waistcoat, collar and tie. He looked older too, because of the brilliantine with which he had plastered down his usually unruly hair; and his spruce, ordinary clothes brought out for the first time something ridiculous and vulgar in his appearance.

"Shall we go now?" said Tortima as he joined him.

"But is it time yet?" asked Agostino, hurrying along beside him as they crossed the bridge.

"It's always time there," said Tortima with a laugh.

They took a different road than the one Agostino had come by. The piazza was not far away, only about two turnings further on. "But have you been there before?" asked Agostino again.

"Not to that one."

Tortima did not seem to be in any hurry and kept his usual pace. "They'll hardly have finished supper and there'll be no one there," he explained. "It's a good moment."

"Why?" asked Agostino.

"Why, don't you see, we can choose the one we like best."

"But how many are there?"

"Oh, about four or five."

Agostino longed to ask if they were pretty, but refrained. "What do we have to do?" he asked. Tortima had already told him, but the sense of unreality was so strong in him that he felt the need of hearing it reaffirmed.

"What does one do?" said Tortima. "Nothing simpler. You go in . . . they come and show themselves . . . you say: 'Good evening, ladies,' you pretend to talk for a bit, so as to give yourself the time to look them well over . . . then you choose one. It's your first time, eh?"

"Well," began Agostino rather shamefacedly. "Go along!" said Tortima brutally. "You're not going to tell me it isn't the first time. Tell that to the others, if you like, but not to me. But don't be afraid. She does it all for you. Leave it to her."

Agostino said nothing. The image evoked by Tortima of the woman initiating him into love pleased him . . . it had something maternal about it. But in spite of these facts he still remained incredulous. "But—but do you think they'll want *me*?" he asked, standing still suddenly and looking down at his bare legs.

The question seemed to embarrass Tortima for a moment. "Let's go on," he said, with feigned self-assurance. "Once there, we'll manage to get you in."

They came through a narrow lane to the piazza. The whole of it was in darkness, except for one corner where a street lamp shone peacefully down on a stretch of uneven sandy earth. In the sky above the piazza the crescent moon hung red and smoky, cut in two by a thin filament of mist. Where the darkness was thickest Agostino recognized the villa by its white shutters. They were closed, and no ray of light showed through them. Tortima, without hesitation, crossed over to the villa. But in the middle of the piazza, under the crescent moon, he said to Agostino: "Give me the money, I'd better keep it."

"But I . . ." began Agostino, who did not quite trust

Tortima. "Are you going to give it me or not?" persisted Tortima harshly. Agostino was ashamed of all that small change, but he obeyed and emptied his pockets into Tortima's hands. "Now keep your mouth shut, and come along with me," said his companion.

As they came near to the villa, the darkness grew less dense, and they could see the two gateposts, the garden path and the front door under the porch. The gate was not locked, and Tortima pushed it open and entered the garden. The front door was ajar. Tortima climbed the steps and went in, motioning to Agostino not to make a sound. Agostino, looking curiously about him, saw a quite empty hall, at the end of which was a double door, with brightly lit panes of red and blue glass. Their entrance was the signal for a ringing of bells, and almost immediately the massive shadow of someone seated behind the glass door rose against the glass, and a woman appeared in the doorway. She was a kind of servant, middle-aged and very stout, with a capacious bosom, dressed in black with a white apron tied round her waist. She came forward, sticking out her stomach, and with her arms hanging down. She had a swollen face and sulky eyes which looked out suspiciously from under a mass of hair.

"Here we are," said Tortima. Agostino saw from his voice and manner that even he, who was usually so bold, felt intimidated.

The woman scrutinized them hostilely for a moment; then she made a sign, as if inviting Tortima to pass inside. Tortima smiled with renewed assurance, and hastened toward the glass door. Agostino made as if to follow him. "Not you," said the woman, putting her hand on his shoulder.

"What!" cried Agostino, at once losing all his fear. "Why him and not me?"

"You've really neither of you any business to be here," said the woman firmly; "but he will just pass, you won't."

"You're too little, Pisa," said Tortima mockingly. And he pushed the door open and disappeared. His stunted shadow stood out for a moment against the panes of glass; then it vanished in the brilliant light.

"But what about me?" insisted Agostino, exasperated by Tortima's treachery.

"You get off, boy, go away home," said the woman. She went to the front door, opened it wide, and found herself face to face with two men who were just coming in. "Good evening . . . good evening," said the first, who had a red, jolly face. "We're agreed, eh?" he added, turning to his companion, a pale, thin young man. "If Pina's free, I'm to have her . . . and no nonsense about it."

"Agreed," said the other.

"What's this little fellow doing here?" the jovial man asked the woman, pointing to Agostino.

"He wanted to come in," said the woman. A flattering smile framed itself on her lips.

"So you wanted to go in, did you?" cried the man, turning to Agostino. "At your age, home's the place at this hour. Home with you," he cried again, waving his arms.

"That's what I told him," the woman said.

"Suppose we let him come in?" remarked the young man. "At his age I was making love to the maid."

"Well, I'm blest! Get away home . . . home . . . *home*," shouted the other, scandalized. Followed by the fair man he entered the folding door, which banged-to behind them. Agostino, hardly knowing how he got there, found himself outside in the garden.

How badly it had all turned out; he had been betrayed by Tortima, who had taken his money, and he himself had been thrown out. Not knowing what to do, he went up the garden path, looking back all the time at the half-open door, the porch, the façade with its white shutters closed. He felt a burning sense of disappointment, especially on account of those two men who had treated him like a child. The laughter of the jovial man, the cold, experimental benevolence of his companion, seemed to him no less humiliating than the dull hostility of the woman. Still walking backward, and looking round at the trees and shrubs in the garden, he made his way to the gate.Then he noticed that the left side of the villa was illuminated by a strong light coming from an open window on the ground floor. It occurred to him that he might at least have a glimpse of the inside of the villa through that window; and making as little noise as possible he went towards the light.

It was a window open wide on the ground floor. The windowsill was not high; very quietly, and keeping to the corner where there was less chance of his being seen, were papered with a handsome design of large green and he went up to the window and looked in.

The room was small and brilliantly lighted. The walls black flowers. Facing the window a red curtain, hanging on wooden rings from a brass rod, seemed to conceal a door. There was no furniture visible, but someone was sitting in a corner by the window for he could see crossed legs with yellow shoes stretched out into the room. Agostino thought they must belong to someone lying in an armchair. Disappointed at not seeing more, he was going to leave his post when the curtain was raised and a woman appeared.

She had on a full gown of pale blue chiffon which reminded Agostino of his mother's nightgown. It was transparent and reached to her feet; looking at her long, pale limbs through that veil was almost like seeing them float indolently in clear sea water. By a vagary of design the neck of her gown was cut in an oval reaching almost to her waist; and from it her firm, full breasts seemed to be struggling to escape, so closely were they pressed together by the dress, which was gathered round them into the neck with many fine pleats. Her wavy brown hair hung loosely on her shoulders; she had a large flat, pale face, at once childish and vicious, and there was a whimsical expression in her tired eyes and mouth, with its full, painted lips. She came through the curtain with her hands behind her back and her bosom thrust forward, saying nothing and standing quietly, in an expectant attitude. She looked at the corner where the man with the crossed legs was lounging; then, silently as she had come, she turned and disappeared, leaving the curtain wide open. At the same time the man's legs vanished from the sight of Agostino. He heard someone get up and withdrew from the window in alarm.

He returned to the path, pushed the garden gate open, and came out on the piazza. He felt a keen sense of disappointment at the failure of his attempt, and at the same time a feeling almost of terror at what awaited him in days to come. Nothing had happened, he had not possessed any woman, Tortima had gone off with all his money, and tomorrow the same old jokes would begin again and the torment of his relations with his mother. Years and years of emptiness and frustration lay between him and that act of liberation. Meanwhile he had to go on living just as before, and his whole soul rebelled at the bitter thought that what he had hoped for had beceme a definite impossibility. When he got home, he went in without making any noise; he saw the visitor's luggage in the hall and heard voices in the sitting room. He went upstairs and flung himself on the cot in his mother's room. He tore off his clothes in the dark, and throwing them on the floor got into bed naked between the sheets. . . .

After a little he became drowsy and at last fell asleep. Suddenly he woke with a start. The lamp was lit and shone on his mother's back. She was in her nightgown and with one knee on the bed was just going to get in. "Mama," he said suddenly, in a loud, almost violent voice.

His mother came over to him. "What is it?" she asked. "What is it, darling?" Her nightgown was transparent, like the woman's at the villa; the lines and vague shadows of her body were visible, like those of that other body. "I want to go away tomorrow," said Agostino, in the same loud, exasperated voice, trying to look not at his mother's body but at her face.

His mother sat down on the bed and looked at him in surprise. "But why? . . . What is the matter? Aren't you happy here?"

"I want to go away tomorrow," he repeated.

"Let us see," said his mother, passing her hand gently over his forehead, as if she were afraid he was feverish. "What is it? Aren't you well? Why do you want to go away?"

His mother's nightgown reminded him so much of the dress of that woman at the villa: the same transparency, the same pale, indolent, acquiescent flesh; only the nightgown was creased, which made this picture even more intimate and secret. And so, thought Agostino, not only did the image of that woman not interpose itself as a screen between him and his mother, as he had hoped, but it actually seemed to confirm the latter's femininity. "Why do you want to go away?" she asked again. "Don't you like being with me?"

"You always treat me like a child," said Agostino abruptly, without knowing why.

His mother laughed and stroked his cheek. "Very well, from now on I'll treat you like a man. . . .Will that be all right? But you must go to sleep now, it's very late." She stooped and kissed him. Then she put out the light and Agostino heard her get into bed.

"Like a man," he couldn't help thinking before he fell asleep. But he wasn't a man. What a long, unhappy time would have to pass before he could become one.

LUCA

Translated from the Italian
by Angus Davidson

LUCA had spent the summer holidays at the usual seaside resort. Now he went back home feeling unwell, feeling, indeed, that he would soon really be sick. He had recently grown with abnormal speed, and at fifteen was already as tall as an adult, but his shoulders were still narrow and thin, and in his white face his eyes, with their too-great intensity, seemed to be consuming the thin cheeks and forehead. If he had realized the delicate state of his health and the dangers that attended it, he might have asked permission of his parents to break off his studies; but at his age, when sensitiveness is awake and consciousness still sleeping, he did not relate his weakened physical condition to the deep repugnance which his studies aroused in him. He had always gone to school and it seemed natural to go on doing so—even if the things he had to learn did not present themselves in orderly fashion according to the days and months of the scholastic year but heaped in front of him in a steep, insurmountable mass, like a mountain whose smooth sides offer the climber no hold for hand or foot. His will was not lacking, but rather some physical impulse; some fortitude of the body which he could not identify. Sometimes his body seemed to give way beneath him, as an exhausted horse, dull-eyed with fatigue, gives way beneath the rider who vainly spurs it on.

Often, however, this body of his rebelled when Luca least expected it—not so much before heavy tasks as for reasons of no importance. And then Luca was subject to sudden, furious rages during which his body, already so exhausted, seemed to burn up the little strength it still retained in paroxysms of hatred and revolt. More than anything it was the dumb, inert resistance of inanimate objects, or rather, his own incapacity to make use of such objects without fatigue or injury that threw him into these devastating rages. A tight or badly laced shoe into which he could not easily fit his foot; a school-bound streetcar, barely missed after a long chase; a bottle of ink upset on his exercise book, forcing him to recopy an entire page; the unforeseen, painful impact of his head against the sharp corner of his desk as he raised himself after picking up a fallen book; these and other absurdities were enough to put him beside himself with rage. He would either curse and grind his teeth, sometimes going so far as to childishly bang the corner of the desk with his fist or hurl the inkpot on the floor, or he would burst into violent weeping in which some vast and ancient grief seemed to be pouring itself out. He felt that the world was hostile to him, and he to the world; he felt he was waging continuous, nerve-racking warfare against everything around him.

This revolt of inanimate objects, this incapacity on his part to love and to dominate them, had reached a climax during the summer at the seaside. One particular incident had proved once and for all the state of reciprocal enmity between himself and the world of reality. Luca was a clever mechanic, and when anything went wrong with the electricity in the house he was asked to help. One evening there was a short circuit and the lights went out. Luca, at the sound of his mother's voice calling to him through the dark rooms, was quickly on the scene with his tools. But, whether he had failed to take the precaution of not touching the ground or whether by the dim light of the candle he had not noticed that the wires were touching, the electric current suddenly sprayed and crackled between his fingers and ran through his body. Luca started shouting, and at the same time involuntarily tightened his grip on the wiring, thus intensifying the shock, which in turn made him powerless to loosen his hold on the wire. His mother, terrified and not knowing what to do, hovered around him, while Luca yelled and the electric current continued to vibrate through his body with a malignant power which seemed to come, not from the wires, but from the whole mysterious, hostile world which—although he had no knowledge of it—he hated. At last, after a long interval of confusion, somebody turned off the current at the main switch, and Luca, his hands released, threw himself sobbing into his mother's arms. She did not understand why he was crying in such despair and hugged him mechanically, stroking his head. For a long time Luca continued to weep, his whole body trembling, at the same time feeling bitterly that his mother's caresses no longer protected and comforted him as they had once done. Later, when the lights were on again, it was discovered that the electric shock had caused deep burns in the tips of three of his fingers. The imprint of the wires and, so to speak, of the electricity itself, was clearly visible in a mark which had the jagged shape of a minute flash of lightning.

Another storm of rage came upon him in the train, shortly before he arrived home from his summer holiday. They had risen early and eaten a hasty breakfast in the dismantled house, among trunks and suitcases. As he was swallowing a cup of cheap milk colored with coffee substitute, his mother had said: "Have a good breakfast, because lunch in the dining car is always so late." The idea of lunch in a dining car had immediately delighted him, for he had never been in one. It would be a real pleasure to sit and eat at one of those tiny tables he had sometimes glimpsed from the window of another train. He imagined that the bread and soup and meat would have a quite different taste when eaten at a real little table, with real knives and forks and plates handed by waiters, the landscape meanwhile slipping past one's eyes as the train proceeded on its way. Besides, Luca was extremely sensitive about the opinion of other people and about the formalities of decorous behaviour. He had a wholehearted loathing of meals eaten on one's knee in a railway carriage, among dirty pieces of paper and fruit peelings and leftovers, with cold, greasy food squashed between the two halves of a gaping roll of bread. During such meals there was always somebody waiting to go to the dining car who would look on with an air of self-satisfaction and disgust at the family crouching over paper bags. On their journey to the seaside there had been such a witness, a scornful, well-dressed old lady. Luca had found himself ashamed to eat, and at the same time ashamed of being ashamed. Overcome by these humiliating feelings, he had scarcely touched his food.

The idea of not having to unwrap greasy bits of paper and devour sandwiches had comforted him, and for a large part of the journey he sat quietly looking out at the countryside. At last the waiter came to make reservations for the dining car, and his father failed to take any tickets. Luca thought he was waiting for the second service, and went on gazing out of the window. Then he heard his father say: "After all, we can buy lunch baskets at Orvieto . . . they're much cheaper and they have much better things in them than what they give you in the dining car." His father, as he pronounced these words, showed no particular feeling; Luca felt that he made this decision, not out of meaness, but simply from good sense. Nor did it seem odd to him that his mother, always pliable in the face of any argument that favored an economy, should answer indifferently: "As you like . . . I should really have preferred to go to the dining car, even if only so as not to get my fingers sticky. . . ." It was, in fact, a case of two people coming to an agreement over a matter of no importance. And in truth the discussion went on for another two minutes, in a calm and affable manner, ending in victory for his father—a victory so gentle, in any case, as to seem more like the meeting of two kindred minds. Luca nevertheless, though he realized that the decision had not been made out of spite, flew into a violent rage.

What offended him most was that neither of them asked his opinion and that they treated him as an inanimate object, which, being a mere object, had neither preferences nor ideas, neither tastes nor wishes. At the same time he felt a profound disappointment; all the more heart-rending and catastrophic because he had been so elated at the idea of having lunch in the dining car. But to all these resentments there was added a further one which did not seem to have any precise origin, nor to arise from this particular trouble—the usual fury that assailed him every time he became aware of revolt and insubordination on the part of things and people in opposition to his own will. This fury seemed to come from some far-off place, and it flared like a fierce fire, scorching him and shaking him from head to foot. He went white in the face, clenched his teeth tightly and shut his eyes. He felt himself grow stiff all over with the violent rage that tautened his body; for a moment he felt impelled to open the door and throw himself out of the train. This suicidal temptation did not frighten him, nor did it seem to him absurd; it was, as he realized, the natural outlet of the furious feeling of impotence that overwhelmed him. He opened his eyes and looked at his parents. As though his rage, like a fierce harsh light, had carved out their features in an altogether new manner, he seemed to be observing them for the first time—his mother fair, thin, with an angular face to which the large nose and tight mouth gave an air of authority and wisdom; his father also fair, but soft and rounded, with indefinite, good-natured features. For the first time he felt the hardness and power of his mother and the good sense and kindheartedness of his father as things that were not only external to himself but actually hostile. Things with which he could not come to any sort of an understanding; and which came from remote centers of origin over which he could exercise no kind of control. He understood, it is true, that if he had made his desire clear they would have at once welcomed it; perhaps his mother, who did not like to go back on a decision, might have opposed it, but not for long. But he realized also that he did not want at any cost to compel them to do a thing that they did not seem to have thought of; all the more because that desire of his now filled him, in turn, with a sort of rage, as being a ridiculous impulse and not worth consideration. In any case, the important thing was not so much the question of whether he had lunch in the dining car or in the compartment as the feeling that his parents were made of the same hostile, defiant matter he was aware of in other things. And like other things, they could not, with all the love that they felt for him, be tolerated.

In spite of these reflections, his feeling of rage did not leave him, and when they stopped at Orvieto station it was with extreme repugnance that he watched his father get out of the train, buy the lunch baskets and come back, panting, to the compartment. His father carefully closed the door, pulled up the little folding table that was fixed under the window and put the three baskets upon it. Then, with the superficial and slightly mournful solicitude that was habitual with him, he asked the boy: "Luca, are you hungry? Would you like to have lunch at once or would you rather we waited a little?"

Luca answered without turning his head: "I'm ready whenever you are."

The train started again; and it seemed to Luca that the sight of the countryside, as it rolled past beneath his eyes, soothed, for a moment, his resentment. But suddenly, from whence he knew not, a new wave of rage assailed him, and unable to contain himself, he got up and left the compartment. He went straight to the lavatory, banging the door furiously behind him. There was a mirror above the washbowl, and he thrust his face close to it, opening his mouth wide as though he were screaming, though in reality no sound came out of his throat. He felt he was screaming, nevertheless, noiselessly, with the whole of his quivering body. The train was rocking and swaying violently, clattering across one switch after another. Everything rattled and creaked in the narrow enclosure, the connecting framework of the carriage, the glass in the window frame, the brass rim around the glass, the tumbler in its holder, the floor where moving iron plates danced and clashed together; Luca stood there, his mouth open, with the feeling that he was screaming louder than the din of the train, while his raging fury seemed to him to be the very train itself which sooner or later must inevitably run off the rails, hurtle down an embankment and smash itself to pieces against the side of a hill. He stayed like that for a short time, strained and rigid; then opened the door and went back to the compartment. His father had opened the lunch baskets and was putting the rolls on a newspaper spread on his knees. "There's one for you," he said, offering the first roll to Luca. He turned to his wife and added: "Would you like some wine at once? But perhaps it would be best to eat first and drink afterwards, when we have our hands free." His father spoke always in a drawling voice, as though he were making feeble proposals which he expected, resignedly, to see rejected. Luca took the roll stuffed with cold meat and bit it angrily. He had no appetite and he ate with an effort, keeping his face obstinately turned toward the window. From the compartment behind him came the rustling of paper bags being unfolded, muttered words of offering or of comment from his father, speaking with his mouth full, or from his mother, answering in monosyllables. As soon as he had finished eating he felt as if the food had stuck in his throat. His rage had not subsided, it persisted at the same level in a state of tension that was perhaps less harsh, but no less painful in its continuance.

It was as though his whole body had remained numb and his mind permanently confused. He gazed unseeing at the landscape, now the countryside of his own native city. And upon his stomach he felt the weight of the food he had eaten, like a big, tightly closed package done up in grease-proof paper, full of partly chewed bits and pieces, exactly like the paper bags full of odds and ends that housewives throw out of their windows into the alleys for the cats of the neighborhood. His mother asked him what was the matter, moving her hand across his forehead to smooth back the hair that had been blown about by the wind. And, from the relief afforded him by the contact of that cool, light hand, accompanied as it was by a feeling of nausea that filled his mouth with saliva, he realized that he was feeling sick.

When they arrived, his parents, busy getting the luggage off the train, took no notice of him. But as they were walking with the crowd along the platform, he knew suddenly that before he had gone much farther he would inevitably be sick. His feeling of nausea, very strong now, was felt in an acid taste and in an uncontrollable urge to open his mouth. They passed one carriage, then another, then a third. From each carriage people were getting out, gay and brisk, leaving behind them in the empty compartments crusts and pieces of paper, cigarette butts and bottles. Here was a fourth carriage, already empty, with all the doors wide open. And then they reached the engine with its cab full of handles and tubes and the mouth of its firebox showing red against the background of black iron. The engineer, his face smoke-stained and greasy, was looking at the people and devouring, with a hearty appetite, half a small loaf filled with what looked to Luca like a kind of green and yellow slush—a spinach omelette. At the sight of the omelette, he was conscious of an even more violent feeling of nausea, as though a current of sympathetic attraction like that between a magnet and a piece of steel had come into being between the slush that the engineer was so eagerly devouring and that other slush that was fermenting in his own stomach. Now they had reached the buffers of the engine; he leaned on one of the headlamps and vomited against the great fuming machine. He heard his mother say in a voice that seemed to him very calm: "I knew he wasn't well"; and at the same time he was conscious of a hand holding his head up. His father kept repeating, in a good-natured tone: "It's nothing . . . it's nothing." And he himself, filled with rage and with a profound grief that he did not understand, started sobbing loudly. But as they led him away, downcast and sobbing, his mother saying to him in a voice of irritation: "Why are you crying? . . . you're almost a man and yet you're crying," it seemed to him that having vomited upon the engine had been, in a way, an act of revenge against the train which had brought him back so ruthlessly to the town, to school, to his lessons; in just the same way that his parents, ruthlessly, had refused him the dining car.

ONCE he was back home, in the house where so many of his former acts of rebellion had melted away in force of habit or in boredom, his rage took on a different form, one new to him. As though it had realized the futility of violence, it transformed itself suddenly into a desire for renunciation, for resignation. It was still the same old rebellious impulse, but made expert by the defeats it had suffered, its nature changed into something secret and negative. Luca was not acquainted with the terms applicable to social warfare; if he had been, he would not have been slow to recognize, in the new form that his revolt against the world had taken, the characteristics of a strike. His body no longer grew taut in outbursts of furious destructiveness but let itself go slack, like a relaxed violin-string that looks as if it could never be tight again. Frequently, during the long afternoons that he spent at the table in his own room, he would fall asleep, for no reason, since he had slept well the night before. These were dreamless naps, black, empty, more like absences than naps. They would come upon him halfway through a printed phrase or a written page, and it was of no use for him to say: "I'll finish this piece of reading or writing, and then I'll sleep." It was all he could do to rise from the table and drag himself to his bed. No sooner had he lain down than he was asleep. When he abandoned himself to these sudden, heavy attacks of torpor, he experienced the same feeling of vindictive complacency that he had been aware of while vomiting against the engine on his return from his summer holiday. He realized that this complacency had a destructive character and that it expressed his hostility toward the world. His sleep was like a crossing of the arms, a sign of renunciation, since he had not the strength to reject it. Formerly he would have made a desperate effort to resist these attacks of torpor; and finally, alarmed, would have told his parents about them, as he was accustomed to do whenever he thought he was sick. But now, at the back of this complacency, he seemed to detect the presence of a purpose where in the past he would have seen only a weakness. And carried along by this purpose it pleased him to shake off his former pride as a scholar, now useless and a mere encumbrance, and uncaring, to allow time to flow ruinously over a head now finally submerged. But his physical surrender was still, after all, only the vague indication of a path that he had the power either to follow or to abandon. It seemed to him that having once accepted the principle of inertia, he might as well encourage it—if only to demonstrate to himself that he was acting freely and not under compulsion. He not only refused to resist those fits of torpor and forego telling his mother and father about them, but he actually started provoking them in various ways, by deliberately reading long, dull passages or by concentrating his attention on writing exercises devoid of interest. As soon as he felt his eyes beginning to close and warning shudders running down his back, he would get up and throw himself on the bed. With his head low and his feet high, he would feel as though sleep had seized him by the hair and was sucking him down like a clinging, delicious mud, pulling him ever lower and lower. In this sinking sensation, his head seemed to be filled with an opaque, heavy substance while his feet swayed high above, light and empty. Gradually, repeating to himself: "I should be working . . . I should be translating . . . I should be reading," and thinking at the same time, complacently, that the use of the conditional implied that he would neither read, nor translate, nor do any work at all, he would fall asleep.

But sleep was merely a means to an end; he could not always be asleep and since the ultimate object continued to be a revolt against doing any lessons, Luca sought new ways of putting it into effect. This search excited him, like an unsuspected vocation. After the afternoon classes he used to go home with extreme unwillingness, thinking with profound disgust of the hours of homework that awaited him. Now that it was a question of divesting his work of its obligatory character and of taking away from it all its importance, he found himself watching for the approach of those hours with a lively and pugnacious feeling of impatience—like a man going to accomplish a task that is in accordance with his strongest inclinations. He would come out of school, say good-bye to his companions and go slowly home, all alone, at that melancholy hour when day is dying and night is still far off. It seemed to him that everybody went out at that time, driven from indoors by the dreariness of the twilight; and it gave him pleasure to think that he, on the contrary, was headed homeward. The sky grew dark above his head as he passed through the deserted streets of the quarter in which he lived. He would enter the elevator and go up to the apartment. At that hour it was empty except for the quiet presence of the old servant in the kitchen; his father was still at the office, his mother out paying visits. Luca would go in almost secretly and, without turning on any lights, would steal through the semi-darkness of the other rooms to his own bedroom. He was conscious as he did this of a mournful feeling that he was some kind of animal, ill-adapted for life, slinking back to its lair to die in peace. In his room he would turn on the light, shut the doors and windows and sit down at the small table. He was fully conscious of what he was preparing to do, and he sat down at the table with an almost ritual solemnity; both feeling and attitude were very different from his former boredom and repulsion. He had thought out another method of avoiding his work, besides going to sleep, and in his private language he called it the "distraction exercise." This exercise consisted in reading or writing mechanically, trying at the same time, with all his might, to put himself entirely outside the things he was writing or reading.

Here, for instance, was his history book with the sentence: "Conditions in France and in Europe were now such as to permit the French government to give attention to the King of Spain's request . . ." As he read these words, Luca would force his attention away from them, isolating them in an empty absurdity. And indeed it seemed to him that the words, as he spelled them out, receded in a kind of flat, vertiginous perspective, growing progressively smaller, like the cards of letters used by oculists to test people's sight; and then, when they had almost disappeared over the horizon of that vast space to whose farthest limit they had retreated, they would leap suddenly forward in block letters, terrifying in their sound and enormous in size: "CONDITIONS IN FRANCE AND IN EUROPE WERE NOW . . ." It pleased him to discover that in these forward and backward movements the words, though they echoed in his mind syllable by syllable, remained incomprehensible, detached from all meaning, destitute of any logical framework, more dead than the words of any dead language. Sometimes, in order to make quite certain of this feeling, he would read aloud and would notice with satisfaction that the sound did not explain the words but rather added a quality of absurdity. Knowing that it needed but a slight effort of the muscles of his ears to make his voice sound detached and strange—as though issuing from some other mouth—he amused himself by repeating the same phrase in flute-like tones like a woman, or in a cavernous voice like an ogre: "Conditions in France and in Europe were now . . ." Usually this exercise ended with the cutomary falling asleep. He felt sleep coming to him from the feet upward, in the form of a welcome numbness in the legs; he would get up and stagger over to the bed and throw himself upon it. His eyes fixed on the table, where he could see the lamplight falling uselessly upon his abandoned books, he would allow himself to be submerged in the dark waves of sleep. He would sleep for an hour or two, then wake up and discover joyfully that there was no time that day for any more work, and that the next day, at school, he would not know his lesson.

At school these experiments were even easier, for classes and professors had always been foreign to him and had been, even from the first, enveloped in an empty atmosphere of absurd and quite unacceptable reality. Seated at his desk in front of an open book, it was easy for him to fill his eyes and ears with a kind of soft mist through which the voice of the professor explaining the lesson was transmuted into the abstract, magical muttering of a black witch doctor echoing unintelligibly through the savage solitude of an African forest. That, thought Luca, was how the speech of the living must sound in the ears of the dead. He imagined himself to be dead, to have lost the meaning of the spoken word, to be hearing sounds that were disconnected and absurd. He knew that this process of detachment went through three phases—a first phase during which he heard and saw with normal clarity but without understanding; a second in which sounds and shapes dissolved and became confused though they still remained perceptible; and a third in which he no longer either saw or heard and in which everything was swallowed up in that silent mist. It was during one of these experiments that he suddenly heard the professor's voice asking him: "Mansi, may one know what you are thinking about?" He would have liked to answer: "I'm learning how not to think." However, all he said was: "Me? . . . about nothing." "That is obvious," remarked the professor.

Luca, in the past, had had a great deal of self-respect; and he had been among the best pupils. Now, ever since the beginning of the new term, he was among the worst. Under the rain of reprimands and bad reports he experienced a feeling of particular satisfaction, since these reprimands were really eulogies and these bad reports good reports according to the conduct he had now decided to maintain. At the same time, he could not help feeling a profound bitterness at the thought that his status at school was deteriorating every day and would soon become irretrievable. He often asked himself why he behaved this way; and he admitted that he could find no other motive than an obscure point of honor, arid, unpleasant, entirely negative and therefore almost insupportable. "Why do I do this?" he wondered. And meanwhile, amid all these conflicts, time was passing.

THE answer to the question: "Why do I do this?" came to Luca quite by chance at this time from an incident of small importance.

One morning, because of the illness of a professor, lessons finished two hours before the usual time. As Luca came out to the street in front of the school, a boy with a football in his arms detached himself from a group and came up to him. This boy had an unusual name, Virginio, and Luca disliked him, chiefly because of his physical appearance. He was very fat, always out of breath and always busy. A soft black down shadowed his upper lip and his cheeks; beneath this his features, lost in fat, were almost embryonic, like those of some monstrous baby, and there was something indefinably feminine about him which had earned him the nickname of Teresina, after a celebrated Fat Woman. He said, panting, and with an air of importance: "We've made up two sides . . . we're going to have a game at the Villa Borghese . . . but we need a goalkeeper . . . would you like to come?"

Luca was a less than mediocre football player, although he liked the game very much; and he realized at once that this invitation from the fat boy, the recognized organizer of the class sporting activities, was an unaccustomed honor for which he ought to show his appreciation. They hardly ever invited him, so that this was an opportunity to be seized for putting his inadequate athletic qualities to the test. His first impulse was to accept, but some mysterious resistance changed the words in his mouth and he said: "I'm sorry . . . but I've got to get home . . . another time, perhaps."

The fat boy wasted no time in discussing the matter; perhaps he already regretted having asked him. "Hey, Mario . . . d'you want to be goalkeeper?" he shouted, turning his back on Luca and going off toward another boy.

Luca saw this boy stop and speak to the fat boy. The group of players walked across and surrounded them. Then, after a short discussion, they moved off toward the gardens. The football had passed from the fat one's arms to those of a small, dark boy. The latter swayed as he walked along on his short legs; then he threw the ball up in front of himself and gave it a resounding kick which sent it high into the air. The boys scattered over the roadway and the sidewalks as they ran after the ball. One of them stopped it with his foot and started dribbling it carefully in front of him.

The street in which the school was situated was long, straight and deserted, flanked by severe looking factories, convents and offices. Between those rows of windows, on the clean asphalt, in the clear light of that early November day, went the group of boys, kicking the ball from one to the other with little leaps and bounds. Luca stood by the corner of the school building, watching them as they receded with a bitter satisfaction that did not seem new to him, though he found it difficult to recall when he had felt it before. Then he remembered: it was the same satisfaction that the ruin of his school career aroused in him. This discovery produced a swarm of swift, burning thoughts and held him entranced as he watched the footballers. It was as if not his companions but his own boyhood had departed, finally and forever. They would go on playing forever in the gardens of the villa and he would be excluded forever from their games. But he had at last understood the reason that underlay his refusal. Meanwhile the boys went farther and farther away, growing smaller and smaller in the perspective of the long empty street. At last they threw the ball into a cross street and disappeared. Only then did Luca shake off his stupefied meditations and start toward home.

During the following days he observed that the sense of discovery he had experienced when comparing his refusal to play football with his refusal to work was confirmed and deepened. It was not so much a precise thought as a direction that had at last been given to his disordered feelings of disgust and rebellion. He had believed that he hated only his lessons; now he realized, when he thought again of the feeling of aversion that the fat boy's invitation had aroused in him, that he hated other things as well. What things? A rapid survey brought him to the astonishing discovery that his hostility embraced not merely one or a few aspects of his life, but all. At Luca's age it is easy to leap from the obscurest feelings to a strenuous abstract logic, disdainful of all compromise and of any possible exception. Luca reflected that the world, in the persons of his mother, his father, his teachers, his schoolfellows, wanted him to be a good son, a good pupil, a good friend, a good fellow; but he himself had no love for the world, nor for those roles that they wished to impose upon him, and therefore he must disobey. Not, however, with obscure acts of violence, with the sterile rages of an exhausted body, as in the past; but observing an order, a plan, with calmness and detachment, as though applying the rules of a game. The word "disobey" pleased him because it was familiar. Throughout his childhood and a great part of his boyhood he had heard his mother say that he must be obedient, that he was disobedient, that if he didn't obey she would punish him, and other similar phrases. Perhaps by starting to be disobedient again on a more logical, higher plane, he was merely rediscovering an attitude of mind which was native to him but which he had lost. So far he had been disobedient only in the sphere of his school life, which was the dullest and most absurd part of his existence. But since the incident of the football game, he was discovering that this disobedience could be extended to other spheres as well; it could embrace other things which, because they were normal and obvious, had hitherto escaped him—the affections, for instance; and—an extreme case which immediately fascinated him—the actual fact of living.

There came to him, at this thought, the feeling that it was truly a kind of game; it was like a composition complete in itself, an end in itself, with its own rhythm, its own design, its own meaning. Disobedience was the theme of the composition, and all the acts that accompanied it and that involved him ever more deeply, were the variations. The game, furthermore, resembled one of those drawing exercises for beginners, wherein the drawing is already indicated by a series of dots so that all the inexperienced child has to do is to follow the line of dots with a pencil. It was a cruel, destructive sort of game, but a game none the less, because it was carried out on a disinterested, experimental plane. It was in fact chiefly a question of following that mysterious movement which grew steadily more rapid and more coherent and which seemed to be carrying him toward utter annihilation; and of discovering, each time, the conjuncture of circumstances in which to live meant doing certain things, to die, doing the opposite things, and of regularly choosing the latter. Like all boys, Luca had a strong sporting sense. He decided that from now on he would hunt out all the things that bound him to this life for which he felt such a calm and satiated disgust. All this might have frightened him if he had seen it as it really was, a kind of suicide. But dressed in the familiar, innocuous guise of a game it attracted and pleased him.

Oddly enough he did not think of his affection for his parents as a bond that held him to life and that must be destroyed. As a matter of fact he did not feel himself bound to them to any greater extent than to the furniture in his home, or to his schoolfellows. He no longer remembered how or when it had happened, but in some now fabulous past some irreparable thing certainly had occurred which made him cease to love them.

This decay of his filial love was brought home to him by the comparison of his former feelings with those of the present. There had been a period when he had had a feeling of almost religious reverence for his parents, when it had seemed to him that they were perfect and that they derived from this perfection an authority that was both lovable and unquestionable. This perfection, he remembered, had seemed to him to be founded upon an almost unbelievable goodness, a goodness that, just because it was unbelievable, was moving in the highest degree. It was not the kind of goodness that later on had been prescribed to him by schoolmistresses and governesses and by his parents themselves, a goodness made up of rules and precepts, of regulations and duties; it was a much wider sort of goodness, indescribable, without beginning and without end, a goodness of which he felt the effects without investigating the causes. To this goodness furthermore, he had never made any appeal; it was enough for him to be conscious of its omnipotent presence all around him and above him, the source of his life and its ultimate justification. During those years this goodness had been what he thought the sun must be for the grass and for the flowers of the fields—a flood of light, everlasting, indifferent perhaps, but though blind, infinitely generous, impregnating every one of his acts, even the smallest, every moment of his life, even the most fleeting, and imbuing them with warmth and energy. At that time he had really been, without recognizing it, grateful to his parents for having brought him into the world and for being themselves alive; and in that, fundamentally, lay their goodness.

He could not have said whether the certainty of this perfection, made up as it was exclusively of goodness, had declined on account of one precise, detached incident, or through a series of minute facts difficult to remember. The only thing he was sure of was that now nothing at all remained of that perfection and of the veneration he had accorded to it. Like the sun, which you cannot look at full in the face and which is all light and nothing but light and whose contours you cannot exactly define, so at one time the countenances of his parents had been unknown to him. He would look at them without distinguishing them, observing nothing but the light of that blinding, beneficent goodness. But today—just as if the brilliant morning had been followed by a dreary evening and those two suns had been transmuted into two dead, cold moons—today he could see their faces clearly, and in those faces the smallest and most disheartening details. He saw them, in fact, with complete precision, in the pitiless light of reality, just as he saw the faces of his schoolfellows or his teachers. And because he saw them so well, it seemed to him that they had been degraded to a lower rank. And with this degradation to objects of insignificance there had disappeared from his life the warmth that gave it energy. He did not recognize this with absolute clarity, but he had an obscure intuition that his revolt against the world must have begun just at the time this warmth had diminished.

One incident contributed to the final fixing of his parents' new character and of his new feeling about them. His father, when he came home in the evening, usually took out of his pocket the afternoon papers and gave them to Luca to read; later, at bedtime, he would take them back again because, as Luca knew, he liked to read them in bed before he went to sleep. It was one of those familiar habits that make up the smooth, unbroken surface of everyday life. One evening Luca, perhaps out of absent-mindedness, left the dining-room and went to bed taking the newspapers with him. In bed, after having looked at the pictures and run through some of the articles, he began to think that his father had been left without the papers and would certainly be very sorry not to have them. This mental picture was colored by pathetic reflections of the former paternal goodness, fallen now to the level of mere human goodness, but still moving and lovable. He imagined that his father did not come to ask him for the papers because he did not want to awaken him; and this sacrifice appeared to him to be one more proof of his father's tender affection. Furthermore he knew that his parents, even after they were in bed, stayed awake until late, chatting or reading. For a long time he weighed the pros and cons, and finally decided to take the newspapers straight to his father in his room. He jumped out of bed, went barefooted into the passage and along to the door of his parents' room. He stood listening for a moment. He thought he could hear them talking and he went in without knocking, with a haste that came from affection and from a desire to repair the wrong done to his father.

The lights were on, as he had expected. The bed took up a large part of the wall opposite the door, so that the first thing Luca saw was the empty pillow and the sheets turned back on both sides of the bed. The empty bed did not hold his attention for more than a moment. To the right of the bed in the farthest corner of the room stood his father and mother in unusual attitudes. His father was wearing wide-striped pyjamas which were crumpled over his fat body; his mother was standing close beside his father, her bony limbs visible through the transparency of her nightgown. His father was clasping to his chest with both arms a bundle which Luca immediately recognized as banknotes and industrial bonds. His mother, standing in front with her arms raised, was fumbling at a picture hanging on the wall.

Luca knew that picture extremely well: it was a copy of a Raphael Madonna, and beneath it was a medieval *prie-dieu* made of dark-colored wood, with a red brocade cushion upon it. As a child, Luca had for a long time been made by his mother to kneel on that cushion when he said his evening prayers. He used to kneel down, join his hands, and turning his eyes up to the picture, repeat in a docile manner the words of the prayer which his mother, sitting beside him, would recite to him, little by little, in a patient voice. This prayer was not at that time distasteful to him; first because it was a thing easily endurable though boring, with that mild, pleasing boredom which is the staple nourishment of infancy, and also because the picture of the Madonna, so gentle, with her Child in her arms, she herself clothed in red and blue, with a pure, luminous landscape behind her, attracted him and gave rein to his imagination. Once, with sleep coming upon him, he had even thought that the picture had nodded and smiled at him. More often, as he repeated mechanically the words of the prayer, he had speculated upon the expression of the Virgin's countenance, or upon the details of the hilly, spring-like landscape that opened out behind the shoulders of the figure. Then, in the way these things happen, one day or another—perhaps on their return after the holidays—this habit of saying his prayers there had been interrupted. For a time he had gone on saying his prayers by himself; finally he had given up saying his prayers altogether.

Perhaps he had opened the door without making a noise; perhaps the door had been ajar and he had only to push it; perhaps his parents were so completely absorbed in what they were doing they had not heard him. However that may be, he stood for a long time, motionless at the door, watching them without their noticing his presence. He saw his mother open her arms, take hold of the picture by its frame, detach it from the wall and put it down carefully on the floor, leaning it against the wall. He realized then that the picture had concealed the square, slightly shiny gray surface of the steel door of a safe. "Two b's and one s," his father said, standing close behind his mother. Following her husband's instruction, his mother turned certain discs in the metal door and swung it noiselessly open. It was a small safe, as Luca could see, and contained on its two shelves several other bundles of banknotes and rolls of bonds. "Push them well back," said his father in his usual melting voice; "otherwise we'll never get these in too." His mother obeyed, and Luca saw her pushing far into the safe, with her thin arms, the money and the bonds already there so as to make room for the new ones. Then, acting on a sudden impulse, he went into the room and threw the newspapers down on the bed, saying: "There are the papers." He saw his father give a violent start, like a thief caught in the act, and his mother turn her head in astonishment, with a look already severe; then he hurriedly left the room. In his own bedroom, the confused feeling of having done a good deed was mixed with a bitter taste of disappointment and guilt. But he was drowsy, and after turning over in his mind, from various angles, the new, disturbing picture of the safe hidden behind the holy picture and of his parents, in a state of semi-nudity, their arms laden with money, he fell asleep.

Next day he had already almost forgotten the incident, or rather he tried not to think of it. But in the evening, at table, at a moment when his father was not there, his mother observed dryly: "Remember, another time, that one doesn't go into bedrooms without knocking." Luca blushed and felt inclined to answer: "And why did you for so many years make me say my prayers kneeling in front of your money?" The remark came into his mind just as though it had taken shape by itself, during sleep, by a sort of spontaneous coagulation, like ice on a winter night. He realized at once that it was an extremely apposite remark, and felt that it contained much more than he himself meant by it. But he restrained himself and hung his head, pretending to be mortified. Later, thinking over the incident again, he came to the conclusion that it had been, if not the primary cause, at any rate the principal occasion for the progressive decline of his parents to the status of things that were alien and unloved.

BUT, if affection for his parents no longer held him to life, and if there was now no need for him to take the trouble of destroying it, since it had, so to speak, burnt itself out and destroyed itself, there were still other things that seemed to him too much alive and too obtrusive, which were therefore fitted by natural right to become a part of the game of destruction that he was consistently evolving day by day. Property, for instance. Luca, ever since he had been a baby, had looked upon all objects in his own possession with a feeling of jealousy and exclusiveness which—as generally happens—had been encouraged and stimulated by his parents in every possible way. Ever since his earliest days, toys had always been given him with an accompanying significant exclamation which contained both an opinion and an appeal to his possessive instinct: "Isn't it lovely? . . . Try not to break it."

Later came other toys more ingenious and less simple, such as Meccano and a marionette theatre and with them the first books of fables and children's stories. More than anything else, Luca had been crazy about his little theatre, and his father, noticing this passion, had cultivated it by bringing his son, at least once a week, a present of one or two marionettes. He used to say, in a deliberately careless manner, without raising his eyes from the paper he was reading: "Luca, why don't you go into the hall and have a look in my overcoat pocket? I believe there might be something there for you." Luca, filled with delight and, at the same time, with a strange sort of humiliating feeling that he was succumbing to an almost illicit passion, would run into the hall; and there in fact, sticking out from the pocket of his father's overcoat as it hung on the coatrack, would be a long package with bits of wire projecting from it. When he had undone the paper with impatient fingers, there would appear a couple of warriors with breastplates of shining tin foil, or a grand lady dressed in sky-blue velvet, or a black and red devil armed with a fork, and a white-garbed cook. Luca would embrace his father and then run to his room and place the marionettes beside the others that he already possessed, in a big wooden box with compartments. In this way he had come to own more than a hundred dolls. At first he had tried to make them perform improvised acts on the stage of the tiny theatre, against a background of scenery representing a palace, a forest, or a prison. But then the collector's passion had prevailed over the disinterested taste for playing, and he had been content to lay his marionettes in rows in the big box, as a miser hoards coins at the bottom of a chest. He would count them over and over, kiss them, stroke them, gaze at them for a long time as he knelt on the floor, then put them back in the box—and that was all. He was conscious, as he did this, of an immense satisfaction which, however, he always felt to be mingled with a kind of obscure remorse. This passion for the marionette theatre had lasted longer than any of the others. But in the end the remorse had overcome the passion, he had felt satiety and disgust with his collection of dolls and had abandoned them to the dust at the bottom of a cupboard. His father had noticed this neglect and had ceased to give him any more presents of marionettes.

After the theatre it had been Meccano, the use of which his father had taught him, himself crawling about on the floor and putting together the first simple machines. Finally, at a later age, had come the first adventure stories, the stamp collection, the sporting goods. Every time, the same progression had occurred in his mind, from disinterested amusement to the jealous, inert sense of possession, from attachment to disgust. But this disgust had never been strong enough to induce him to rid himself completely of the objects which no longer interested him. So violent a possessive passion created, between him and the things that had been once so beloved and were now neglected, an obscure bond of jealousy and fear, on account of which—though he completely ceased to make use of them or to enjoy them, though he even sometimes went so far as to forget their very existence—he could never bring himself to give them away or to destroy them. He kept them even if they were spoiled or mutilated, and the drawers in his cupboard were full of odd, crumpled albums of stories, headless or legless marionettes, half-empty boxes of

Meccano. The books he was constantly acquiring and reading were an exception; and the stamp collection too, which—though with lessened interest—he continued to enrich with new specimens.

Later on, as the last act in this lengthy initiation into the ownership of property, Luca's father, when he considered him to be old enough, allowed him a small monthly sum as pocket money. Luca drew his allowance on the first day of each month and his father, as he handed him the money, expected in return a kiss of gratitude on the cheek. Money, as Luca soon discovered, aroused in his mind a sense of possession that was more mysterious and more absolute than that aroused by the dolls and other objects, a feeling that was remote from all idea of play or amusement, that was in fact quite incomprehensible. At first he spent it on sweets and books, but on finding that he could get his parents to give him sweets and books without his having to break into his treasure, he took to hoarding it and not spending it. He thought vaguely of saving a sufficient sum for the acquirement of some particularly expensive object—what, he did not know; he was, in reality, succumbing to the same instinct that had made him collect marionettes. Only then it had been a question of objects in which certain characteristics of quality and variety had been more important than mere quantity. Now, on the other hand, in the case of money, which consisted of ugly crumpled notes and coins that all looked alike, only quantity, with its stark numerical increases, counted as a stimulus to his collector's enthusiasm. And so, almost without noticing it, he slipped from the joy of possession—harsh though its taste may have been—into avarice. It was an innocent, ignorant avarice, like the shamelessness of a child that is allowed by its mother to run naked on the beach. So ignorant was it that he announced one day triumphantly to his father that he wanted to save up his monthly allowance until he reached the sum of a thousand *lire*. "Well done," answered his father, kissing him, "but in that case you ought to put your money in the savings bank." And he explained to him that not only would the money be safer than in a box, but also it would increase regularly, without any trouble on his part, just as a plant increases and bears fruit. Only then, in the midst of his father's praises and explanations, did Luca become aware of an unexplained feeling of shame. And with the excuse that he had not enough money to open a banking account he refused the offer of a savings book. The feeling of shame, however, vanished almost at once; it was but the premature glimmer of a conscience not yet awakened. And the coins and the notes of his monthly pocket money continued to pile up in his desk.

The sacrifice of his possessions and his money, in spite of those former now forgotten emotions of satiety, disgust and shame of which only now did he think he understood the full importance and meaning, was even more difficult than the sacrifice of his pride as a scholar. It was the reluctance of an exhausted body which had led him to shirk his lessons, but he felt he would never have reached the point of repudiating his property had it not been for grief and bewilderment such as is inspired by a cruel and apparently unjustified privation. It was true that, from the moment he discovered that they bound him to the world and forced him to accept it, he had felt a kind of raging hatred for these objects and for his savings, but he knew that he hated them precisely because he loved them and not because they were odious in themselves, like his lessons. He felt himself divided as never before, pulled in one direction by the "game" and the dark, mysterious longing to play it out right to the end, in the other by the painful feeling that he was blowing up his bridges behind him, making impossible any turning back from the unknown, perilous land into which he was venturing. After all, he had passionately loved his books, his stamp albums, his sports equipment; after all, every penny put away in the box had represented, for him, the sacrifice of something that he could have bought and the hope of some other thing that some day he would buy. Those objects and that money were not merely objects and money, but living, tenacious strands in the woof of which his existence was woven. But it was just because of this that he wished to break those threads; for they were also a sign of obedience to the destiny which had been imposed upon him without his being consulted, and to the world against which he had attempted so often, and always in vain, to rebel. Had they been things already dead, abandoned by the love which had in the past made them alive—as in a sense his parents were—their destruction would have been useless. But the contrary was true; and the rules of this bitter game of disobedience admitted no exceptions.

Several times he postponed the act; then finally, one day, made up his mind. Among his schoolfellows there was a certain quiet, pedantic boy who was convinced of his own perfection both as a scholar and as a boy just as though the conditions of school and boyhood were going to last the whole of his life. He was called Poli and he had a big, close-cropped head very like a pumpkin upon which somebody, with the point of a small knife, had roughly carved the features of a human face. Poli's thin, pinched body also bore out this idea of a pumpkin, for it made one think of the thin, fragile stalks at the end of which, among the furrows of the field or on the roof tiles, these enormous yellow fruits swell to their full size. He was the best boy in the class, and his superiority was always at the same high level and could never be surpassed, whether it was a case of algebra or Latin or Italian or history. This easy and apparently effortless superiority seemed to Luca mysterious, as though it were the product of some kind of witchcraft rather than of a mind subject to forgetfulness and error, like his own. He invited Poli to spend an afternoon at his home, and Poli immediately remarked: "I warn you that if it's a matter of helping you with your homework, nothing doing." Luca slyly assured him that it had nothing at all to do with homework.

Poli arrived, rather diffident, and Luca, after a few words of welcome, announced his intention of making him a present of his stamp collection. As he said this he brought out the collection, four large albums bound in red and gold cloth, and showed them to Poli. The latter, incredulous, suspected a trap or an obligation of some kind. "But why to *me*?" he asked finally; "we're not friends . . . we hardly know each other."

"I think I shall soon be going abroad," Luca answered calmly, "and as I was very fond of this collection, I thought you would be the only person who would keep it in order."

Tempted and at the same time visibly anxious not to show it, Poli, with hesitating fingers, turned the leaves of the albums. Then he said: "I'll give you something in exchange . . . not so valuable as the collection of course . . . but something . . . what would you like?"

"I don't want anything," replied Luca.

Then, to change the subject, he too started turning the leaves, pretending that he wanted to show Poli the best items in the collection. What he really wanted was to test whether he was sorry to be getting rid of it. The stamps, neatly stuck on the thick, gilt-edged pages with their headings in four languages, passed before his eyes. Here were the stamps of various European countries since the war, with republican superscriptions on top of the heads of kings—these had given him a dramatic sense of the political upheavals in those lands. Here were the older and more valuable stamps, the Papal stamps, those of the Italian States, of the German Confederation, simple, small, but beautiful with their faded, delicate colors. Here were the colonial stamps with tropical landscapes and figures of natives; they had not cost much but had made him dream of those far-off countries. Here were the stamps issued to commemorate some great man or some great event—these too had stirred his imagination. He had taken pleasure in acquiring them separately or in small sets at stationers' shops, in sticking them into the albums, examining their price and history in the French catalogue. He had taken pleasure in the figures that indicated their value, followed by the names of exotic coinages he had never seen. He had taken pleasure in the round postmarks canceling them, with the date and the place they came from; but above all in those that had wavy lines, which had made him think of the waves of the sea that the letters must have crossed to arrive at their destinations. He realized, as he turned the pages of the albums, that he was suffering a quite different pain from what he had expected. He had expected to suffer through avarice; he found he was suffering, instead, from self-pity. He was truly furious with himself; he could not help thinking it was as if he were divided into two parts, one of which lay abandoned and wretched on the ground, feebly defending itself, while the other stood over it, striking it without mercy. Closing the album sharply, he said: "Well then, d'you want them or not?"

"Of course I want them."

"Wait while I wrap them up in a newspaper."

Leaving the room, he got a newspaper from a cupboard. While he was looking for it, he thought for a moment that he would go back to Poli and announce that the whole thing had been a joke. But the act of getting rid of the collection appeared to him so much more real and genuine a thing than the keeping of it would have been that he hesitated no longer. He took the newspaper and went back into the room. Poli, who was looking admiringly at the stamps, hastily closed the album as he entered, as though he feared that Luca might change his mind if he showed his delight. Luca asked: "You've got a stamp collection already, haven't you?"

"Yes," replied Poli with an air of wisdom, "but much less complete than this. I shall sell the duplicates and buy other stamps with the money."

When Poli had gone Luca started thinking about how he could best get rid of his books. He had a good number of them, and he loved them even more than the stamps. They were, for the most part, adventure stories, detective novels and historical novels. Luca had had two different feelings about these books. He had had an affection for each individual book, for the sake of what it contained, and at the same time he had conceived a tenacious passion for books as pieces of property. This passion had in it a good deal of avarice, springing as it did rather from the joy of possession than from the character of the thing possessed. At one time he had been seized by a restless desire to fill up the three shelves of his bookcase, and since he had not enough novels, he had put in with them some old birthday presents and school primers. All included, this mixed collection of books amounted to the round figure of three hundred, checked over again and again by Luca, who often threw himself down on the floor to count the books and arrange them in order of size. Now while it had been easy to get rid of the stamp albums, which took up little space, with the books there was the problem of emptying the bookcase without his parents noticing. After thinking it over for a long time he decided to make a lie, a suitable lie that would allow him to destroy his library without arousing any suspicions. One day he went to his mother and said: "Mummy, I want to sell all my books."

"Sell all your books?" she said. "Why?"

"I've read them over and over again," replied Luca;

"I want to sell them and buy a phonograph and some records."

It was exactly the right kind of lie. His father and mother would never have allowed such a sale unless it had been for the sake of some new acquisition. For them the only use of property was to create more property. Besides, Luca knew that his mother loved music and could not but be pleased at this new wish on his part. After a pause she said: "But the money from the books won't be enough."

For a moment Luca feared that his mother, touched by his love of music, might offer to buy him the phonograph without his sacrificing his books—though he knew that such generosity, indeed generosity of any kind, was not included among her educational theories; so he hastened to reply: "I'll add my savings to it . . . the whole lot together will make it possible for me to pay the first installments on a phonograph and to buy a few records as well."

Having obtained his mother's approval, Luca asked a second-hand bookseller whom he knew to come to the house. The bookseller, a short young man with a greedy expression and long, curly, greasy hair, came into the room with his overcoat on and his hat in his hand and began to examine the books that Luca handed to him one by one. During this examination Luca wondered again, as before when he had given Poli the stamp collection, whether he was suffering at being separated from his beloved books. He realized his pain was considerably less and that his amused feeling that it was a game, and his consciousness of his own duplicity, partly counterbalanced it. The bookseller, no less interested than Poli had been, tried to depreciate the value of the books, twisting his mouth and repeating that the volumes were too badly damaged and too ordinary; Luca, on his side, pretending to be very angry, contradicted the bookseller's remarks. Finally the latter said: "It's all common stuff . . . I might give you something . . . for the whole lot."

"How much?" asked Luca.

The bookseller twisted his mouth, casting a glance of contempt over the velvet collar of his coat toward the pile of books; then mentioned a figure. "That's not much," said Luca; "let's make it double."

"It's not even worth discussing," answered the bookseller. And he took up his hat which he had placed on the table.

Luca hesitated, then had an idea. He would propose to the bookseller to make one lot of the books together with the puppets and the sports gear. In that way, with one stroke, he would get rid of everything he possessed. "Wait a moment," he said; "I'll throw in some other things and then you can give me the amount I asked for."

"What things?"

Luca went to the far end of the room and opened a cupboard in the wall. In it were a football and some boxing gloves, quite new. There was a sailboat with all its sails spread. There was the marionette theatre, with the marionettes. "I don't keep a junk-shop," said the bookseller. But in his little deep-set eyes there was a sudden look of greed.

"This football alone," said Luca, "cost me more than what you are offering me for all my books."

In the end the bookseller accepted Luca's figure and paid the amount. The same day a carrier came and took away the books and the other things in a packing case. When he was alone Luca looked with satisfaction at his empty shelves. It was just as he had said to Poli, he couldn't help thinking, just as if he was getting ready to leave on a long journey. But the joy that he felt in face of the emptiness of his room was not the joy of departure; it was, rather, the mournful, frigid joy of arrival in a bare and uninhabited land where he knew that nothing awaited him. That day he did even less work than usual. Every moment his mind reverted to his books, to his stamp collection, to his sports gear and, at the thought that he had had the strength to get rid of them, he felt an inexhaustible, mysterious, almost sensual satisfaction. He pictured to himself how Poli must be thinking that he was a fool, how the bookseller must be congratulating himself on his excellent deal, and he was pleased that those two should be convinced that they had taken him in. At the same time he was aware of a certain lightness and sense of relief, like someone who has carried a heavy burden a long way and suddenly feels himself free of it.

There remained, however, the money. He had to get rid of it and at the same time somehow or other justify his failure to buy a phonograph. Luca seized the opportunity at supper of announcing in a quiet but sorrowful manner: "There's something I must tell you . . . but you must both promise me you won't be angry . . ."

His parents looked at him in alarm. Luca went on: "This morning in the streetcar my wallet was stolen—

or possibly it fell out of my pocket . . . anyhow I haven't been able to find it since . . . and in it was all my money . . . the money I was going to use to buy the phonograph . . ."

After the usual questions—"How on earth did it happen?—and why weren't you more careful?—and where, exactly, *was* your wallet?—and why did you have *all* your money in it?"—there followed a discussion during which Luca was several times on the point of giving up all hope that his plan would succeed. For his father, filled with pity at so cruel a misfortune, seemed inclined to give him back the amount he had lost; while his mother, irritated at the loss and at her son's carelessness, opposed the plan of compensating him, arguing that the disaster "would serve him as a lesson for the future." Luca saw that, if his father's argument prevailed, he would not only have twice the sum of money that he already possessed, but he would also be forced to buy the phonograph, with the risk of becoming attached to an object so new and so pleasing. He followed the discussion anxiously, trusting only the soft, yielding strain in his father's character. And in the end his mother succeeded in winning her point; with this reservation, however, that if Luca brought home a good report at the end of the term, his parents would make him a present of the phonograph and of an adequate number of records. Luca, knowing that his report would be extremely bad, smiled cheerfully.

IT WAS the beginning of December. One afternoon Luca went out carrying in the pockets of his overcoat all the money he possessed, in silver coins and small notes. It was a day of respite after long rains. The sky was washed clean but was still dark with a smoky, even color, as though its customary blue had been replaced, not by the confused gray of cloud that dissolves in rain or is chased away by the wind, but by a different hue, more settled, more gloomy, forever unchangeable. In the cool, windless air there was the feeling of exhaustion that succeeds the raging of a storm; but a flock of crows, hovering low, seemed to give warning with their watery cries that there would be more rain. Looking up at the sky and turning the money in his pocket Luca made his way toward the public gardens not far from his home. He knew that at that hour of the day there was no one there and that he could act with the certainty of not being observed. He passed through the big gates and penetrated deep into the gardens. He knew just where he was going—to a place that was bound up in his memory with a sort of fixation of his childhood years. This was an open space bounded on three sides by large, leafy ilexes and on the fourth by a decorative wall adorned with niches, columns and Roman inscriptions. On the other side of the wall lay the zoological gardens, and you could often hear the roaring of the hungry beasts. As a child, Luca had often been brought for a walk by his governesses to this melancholy, deserted place, whose white gravel was darkly framed by the bronze foliage of the ilexes. While his governess, sitting on a fallen capital, would read a book, Luca would climb up to the gratings of the empty windows in the wall and try to look into the zoo beyond. Or he would wander through the ilex grove at the edge of the open space. It was shady in there, and the ground was covered with several layers of dead leaves, dry at the surface, shiny and damp underneath. Here and there grew clumps of nettles whose bright green seemed to feed on all this decay and which filled Luca with repulsion.

One day at home the governess and the maid had been talking about a murder. A young man had been killed; the body had not been found, but some bloodstained garments and the place where these had been discovered had made it seem probable that the corpse had been buried in one of the many public gardens of the town. Luca, without saying a word, pretending to play, had listened for a long time to the comments of the two women; finally he had asked the maid: "Why did they kill him?" She had answered, in a bitter, sharp tone: "Because he was handsome and good, that's why . . .

because he was not made for this world"; and he, struck by this phrase, had asked no more questions. But later, he could not have said why, it had become fixed in his mind that the corpse of the young man had been buried in that same open space where he so often went for a walk with his governess. This supposition had no foundation in fact, not even a mistaken or a very slight one; but perhaps for that very reason it had seemed to him irrefutable. His mind full of this terrible and at the same time fascinating secret, it pleased him to be able, as he wandered about the open space, to look with certainty at the precise spot where, beneath the ground, the corpse was crumbling to pieces. It was a corner between the wall and the grove at the foot of a great ilex; and Luca would often stop at the place, fumbling with his foot among the dead leaves or piercing the soft earth all about him with a stick. He knew that the dead man lay below, and not for anything in the world would he have renounced his conviction. Besides, by dint of thinking about it, he had reconstructed the crime in his own way, and had even formed a picture in his mind of what the murdered man and his murderers looked like. The former had evidently been a handsome, good young man, as the maid had said; but with a special sort of beauty and goodness, in no way conspicuous, invisible to most people, secret. As for the others, Luca saw them as being in every way similar to anyone that he met in the street, ordinary, nameless passers-by. They had perhaps killed him in order to rob him, as the papers said; but in truth, as the maid had said, it had been out of hatred for his beauty and his goodness, to remove him from this world for which he was not made. As he thought of the young man and of his death he felt a horrified attraction and at the same time a great compassion. And then as time went on, almost without realizing it he imagined that the murdered man was himself and that the body buried under the ilex was his own. This duplication of himself, brought about by some kind of imaginative fondness both for the appearance and for the fate of the murdered man, seemed to him perfectly natural, nor was it the first time such a thing had happened. On other occasions, when reading books of adventure, he had dreamed of being this or that heroic, successful character. But it was the first time he had happened to fall in love with so gloomy a destiny, and he had an obscure feeling that unlike his other duplications, this one was due to profound causes, to an obsession in which the whole vocation of his life expressed itself. Such an obsession, as generally happens, had gradually through the years dwindled away like a mist that vanishes in the sunshine; it had become transformed into a sad memory and had finally disappeared into oblivion.

But now, on his way to the open space in the gardens, the obsession came back to him in a different form. He knew by this time that no one had ever been buried in the open space, but that space, consecrated once and for all by his imagination, still remained the place where a corpse *ought* to be buried. He would bury the money in the same spot where he once had thought the murdered man lay; and in burying the money he would in a certain sense be burying himself also—or at any rate that part of himself was attached to the money. And in a vague way mixed up with these more serious matters were memories of buried treasure in circumstances of adventure, echoes of the reading of his early youth.

It was Poe's *The Gold Bug* that he had particularly in mind. But this was a kind of alibi, with the object of removing all quality of the tragic from his sacrifice, of keeping it within the bounds of a game. Apart from the money, he had brought with him a blue glass medicine bottle in which he had enclosed a card explaining exactly where he was going to bury his little treasure. Knowing nothing of ciphers, Luca had contented himself with writing the explanation in schoolboy slang, adding an "f" to each syllable. As in the story he intended to hide this bottle in the hollow of one of the ilexes that surrounded the open space.

He walked across a big square lawn, looking straight in front of him. At the far side of the lawn, the black trunks of the ilex grove swayed back and forth like a crowd seized with panic that rocks to and fro before it breaks and flees. Through the ilexes, the pale whiteness of the gravel catching the light, he had a glimpse of the open space with the wall behind it. He went into the grove, walking with conscious pleasure on the sloping carpet of dead leaves. In the silence under the trees he heard the thin whistle of a bird, and turning he saw the bird itself, big and black, hopping along the ground and then taking flight and hiding among the leaves. He noticed also that as he made his way through the wood he felt a sensation of freedom, and he thought how fine a thing action was, even if it was for the destruction of one's own life, and that action consisted in this—performing acts according to one's own ideas and not merely from necessity.

There was no one in the open space. He walked about for a while, thinking of the time when he had been convinced the corpse was buried there, and he seemed to rediscover intact the lonely, rather sinister feeling of the place which had enthralled him as a child. He looked at the wall with its empty niches, its fragmentary inscriptions, its crumbling cornices. He looked at the windows with the seats beneath them and the big gratings. He climbed up to one of these windows and looked through to the other side, into the zoological garden. He could see the thick foliage of a laurel hedge, and among the leaves he thought he caught a glimpse of the green and gold feathers of some large exotic bird. A distant roaring made him start: the wild beasts, as in the old days, as always, were hungry. He came down again from the window and walked over to the place he was seeking. There was still the same ilex, ancient, with a great black rift in its trunk, its main branch projecting toward the open space and leaning on a brick support like the arm of a cripple on a crutch. Beneath the ilex was the corpse. There came back to him in all its cruelty and pathos the feeling that it was he himself who was buried there, he himself who had been pitilessly murdered.

He knelt down under the tree and started to dig a hole with his penknife. Beneath the dead leaves, the soil was moist and light, full of decayed fragments of bark. He loosened the earth and then scooped it out with his hand and put it to one side in a small heap. When he had finished making the hole, he slowly took from his pocket the banknotes and started tearing them up one after another, letting the pieces drop down into the hole. He discovered that he felt a profound hatred for this money, the sort of hatred one might feel for a tyrant against whom one has rebelled. The idea, too, that money was held in such high esteem by his parents and that he himself without knowing it had for so many years said his prayers in front of a safe full of money contributed to his resentment. As he tore up the notes he felt he was avenging his prayers, was accomplishing an act of reparation. But money, too, was sacred—though in quite a different way from the sacred picture that had concealed it while he was praying. It was sacred because of the royal effigies and symbols that guaranteed its value; and it was sacred because it might have meant happiness to so many people. To the poor man, for instance, who, every morning as he was going to school, stretched out his hand toward him at the corner of the street. But to give it to a poor man would have been, fundamentally, to respect it, to acknowledge its value. And Luca wanted, instead, truly to destroy it, not merely by his own desire to do so but in actual fact. Detested idol as he felt it to be, nothing less than this blasphemous tearing to pieces could serve utterly to desecrate it.

When he had finished tearing up the notes, he mixed the pieces together, and then pulling an envelope full of silver coins from his pocket, he thrust it into the bottom of the hole on top of the notes. He perfomed these actions with a sense of austerity that was grave and conscious, yet mingled with a mortal sadness. The thought of the dead man murdered and buried there came back to his mind, and again he was assailed by that strange feeling of pity for himself. Meanwhile he was filling the hole with earth. When he had finished, he leveled the soil and covered the whole thing over with a carpet of dead leaves.

He rose, brushing the knees of his trousers which were damp and dirty with earth, and then he remembered the blue glass bottle and Edgar Allan Poe's story. By now he lacked the courage to carry out this part of his plan. He had a feeling of gloomy, dazed depression and realized that after all it had not been a game. *He* was not the bloodstained, callous pirate at the end of a life of adventure and freedom; this open space was not the deserted shore of some savage land; and in fact no one would ever make the joyful discovery of his poor little treasure of torn banknotes and small silver coins. The unrelieved mediocrity of himself, of the place and of his treasure all at once seemed to him the best proof of the dogged seriousness of what he was doing and of the impossibility of deceiving himself by attributing to it the importance of a mere game. He took the bottle out of his pocket, opened it, pulled out the little scroll and tore it into tiny pieces. He crushed the bottle under his heel. As he went away, he felt he had acted like a madman. All the same there must be some sense in this madness, only he was not yet in a position to discover it.

AFTER that day Luca seemed to fall into a deathly torpor, as though his body, exhausted by the proofs of will-power that it had given, were recovering itself for a last, decisive effort. More and more often he fell asleep halfway through his homework; more and more often, at school, he fell into fits of abstraction allowing the voices of the professors to spin round him in an empty, sustained silence, like the sound of a broken record endlessly repeating the same phrase. After a few fine days winter had resumed its course and it rained most of the time. The rain descending from a pitch-black sky seemed to be dark and opaque, as though it were mixed with mud, and it spread everywhere a darkness which made Luca feel it would be pleasant to curl up and go to sleep for good. Sometimes, as he did his lessons, he would raise his eyes toward the window and feel convinced that the sky was clearing. He would become absorbed in his work; half an hour later he would look up again and be astonished at the sight of the heavy, gray rain flowing in silent waves down the windowpanes. The sky was like a person weeping in some profound sorrow, who seems every now and then to grow calmer and more serene but who is soon caught up again by grief and starts once more to shed tears, more abundantly and more violently than ever. He liked, above all, the hour between day and night. He liked to linger at his table in front of the rain-streaked windowpanes, forcing himself to read or write in the growing darkness, until the moment when the early winter twilight fell upon his page like an impalpable dust. Then he would rise and throw himself on the bed, falling asleep almost at once. His task remained unfinished.

He had now embarked upon the last part of his plan—physical death. He proceeded however, indirectly, without understanding what he was doing, by observing his own greediness and forming, in consequence, a determination to suppress it, just as he had suppressed his pride in his work at school and his attachment to property. He had always enjoyed eating, especially at lunch time on his return from school, when in the voracity with which he threw himself upon his food he seemed to recognize the acceptance, by his whole body, of all that he had been and had done before he sat down to table. Besides, there were certain kinds of food which, apart from any question of appetite, he particularly liked—sweets and cakes, for example. And so setting in motion his usual "game" mechanism, he took care to eat only a small amount of the ordinary kinds of food and nothing at all of the things he liked best. At first he cut down the amount he ate by a quarter, then by a half. He left the table hungry, but the sensation was short-lived and soon disappeared. It came back again toward evening, but then he would try to sleep, and by sleeping he succeeded in quelling his hunger. He felt that the less he ate the more easily he would fall asleep.

It seemed, then, that there were rules for death as there were for life. If living meant being enthusiastic about one's lessons, loving one's parents, saving up money, becoming attached to objects, eating, it followed that dying must mean not eating, ridding oneself of all affection both for things and for people, and, above all, sleeping.

His parents did not appear to notice this strange loss of appetite on his part; or rather, he thought probably they did notice it but did not attach importance to it, being used to his frequent caprices in the matter of food. His mother, however, remarked one day, in a severe tone of voice: "Why don't you eat? At your age you need nourishment . . . Even if you're not hungry you ought to force yourself to eat . . . if you don't eat how can you do your lessons?" "Yes, how can I do my lessons?" thought Luca, amused. It pleased him to think that his parents were so far from suspecting that he was deliberately not eating, notwithstanding his appetite which urged him to take nourishment. Not eating. He realized that of all forms of disobedience this was the most serious, the most fundamental, the one that most thoroughly undermined familiar authority. His father and mother were there for the special purpose of making him eat. His mother had fed him with the milk of her own breast; his father, like the primitive hunter leaving the cave at dawn armed with bow and arrow to slay some animal on which to feed his family, left home every morning to seek in the town the money that would serve to support him. He felt he had reached the extreme limit of disobedience, that he had arrived in a rarefied atmosphere in which his game was becoming difficult and dangerous. His parents wished him to eat so that he should create strength for himself, and should live; and he, possessed by a feeling of unqualified revolt, wished not to eat, and to die. The game was still on, but he was totally unable to see how far he would have the strength to pursue it. For death had not yet appeared to him as a definite aim, although his every act was a provocation of it.

One day his father placed him in an embarrassing position by making an appeal, not to his appetite, but to a deeper feeling which he did not know he had retained. It was some time since he had reduced his eating, but his parents apparently did not attribute much importance to his loss of appetite. One day he noticed a white package lying beside his father's plate. And at the end of lunch he saw his father take up the package and solemnly undo the string.

It was a cake, the kind that Luca had once liked best. His father put aside the paper and string, placed the cake on a plate and said in his drawling, good-natured voice: "I bought a cake . . . I was passing a confectioner's and I went in and bought it . . . it should be a good one."

"If you bought it for me," said his mother, "you know quite well that I don't like cakes."

"Really I bought it for Luca," said his father; "he used to like them . . . but perhaps"—and he gave a knowing wink—"it may be that, now he's grown big, he's changed his ideas." As he spoke, he pushed the plate toward Luca.

"I'm not hungry any more," said Luca, lowering his eyes.

"Come on," said his father, "there must be a little room left."

He spoke as usual in a mournful, supplicating tone; but it seemed to Luca, that day, that there was a kind of awareness in that eternally beseeching voice of his father. "No, really, I'm not hungry," he repeated.

"Come on, come on," repeated his father, "come on, Luca . . . eat a little bit of it." And he added facetiously: "Anyhow eat just enough to please Daddy . . . d'you remember," he concluded, turning to his wife, "when he was little that was all you had to say to make him eat?"

"Let him alone," said his mother, "if he's not hungry now, he'll eat it this evening or tomorrow . . . cake keeps well."

But to Luca it had seemed that his father, when he implored him in that way, had said to him "Live!" not "Eat!" And he felt affection for his father, and pity for himself, at one and the same time. He thought his father must have guessed his secret, not through his intelligence, which was not suited to such matters, but through his goodness—that same goodness which once upon a time had made him appear perfect, adorable, and of which, in Luca's eyes, in spite of disillusionments, he still seemed to preserve some traces. And he was assailed by a strong temptation to accept the cake and eat it, and with it to accept life. But he realized that to accept life in the form of a slice of cake, even though it was offered by his father's goodness, would be a wretched comedown after he had ruined his school career and got rid of all the things he loved; so clenching his teeth, he hung his head over the plate. "Well?" he heard his father's voice insisting, "don't you really want any?" "I'm not hungry," he repeated. And he sat quite still, his head bowed.

There was a moment's silence. "Well, well, it's a pity," said his father, without showing whether he was really grieved by Luca's refusal. "I bought it specially for you . . . so I'll put it on the sideboard . . . and when you feel like it and are sure no one's watching, you'll eat it, won't you?" And Luca felt a flip on his cheek from his father's hand. He shuddered.

This incident left him with a feeling of deep anguish. He was still tied, and not only by the things he had not yet got rid of, but also by those he thought he had destroyed once and for all, such as his filial love. From that day, there grew in him more strongly than before, the desire to relinquish his existence.

Now one of his mother's sisters was taken sick, and in order to spare her all the noise the two families agreed that her children, twin girls and a little boy of eight should go to their aunt's house. They were accompanied by their governess, an unmarried woman of good family who had formerly been a French teacher. She was a woman of about thirty-five whose shortness was accentuated by the disparity between her narrow shoulders and her big head with its bulging hair. She was not beautiful, with her dull, inexpressive eyes set level with her face and always dark and bruised looking, her overpale, rather flabby cheeks and her bulging loose mouth, shaded with dark down. But this lack of attractiveness, this appearance of ill health were to a certain extent made up for by the extraordinary vivacity and gaiety of her character. Not merely did she perform quite willingly her humble, tedious duty as a governess, but she brought to it a certain whimsical enthusiasm of her own, playing with her three pupils as though she herself were a child, putting herself on equal terms with them, sometimes wrangling with them or actually bursting into tears if one of them was rude to her. This childishness was in strong contrast with a look of ill-repressed sensuality—more suitable, certainly, to a mature woman than to a child—visible in the tiredness of her eyes, in the slightly suggestive beauty of her hands, and in the softness of her hips. She chattered continually, and her voice was clear and shrill with a mischievous sharpness in it; her talk was interspersed with frequent bursts of silvery laughter. The sitting room next door to Luca's bedroom was assigned to her and the three children for their special use. Therefore, to his own drowsiness and idle fancies there was now added, as further distraction from his work, the noise of his three cousins playing with their governess.

In the morning the governess took the children for a walk in the public gardens; but in the early hours of the afternoon she shut herself up with them in the little sitting room and from then on the noise went on, uninterrupted, till the evening. Sitting at his table, his head heavy with the usual drowsiness, Luca could hear the shouts of the children as they ran about the whole afternoon, the woman shouting and running with them in an unending, untiring agitation and liveliness and gaiety which made his own immobility seem, by contrast, even duller and heavier. Every now and then mysterious bumps, as of overturned furniture or falling bodies made him jump; these were followed by stifled, joyous laughter. Or he would hear the governess's voice raised loudly and clearly in playful authority, bidding the children not to make a noise, but after a short pause the din would break out again, louder and more concentrated than ever. The children were boisterous by nature and the young woman stimulated this boisterousness of theirs by the facility of her imagination and the vivacity of her own temperament. Sometimes when the noise was at its loudest the governess would open his door and poke her head in, asking, in a manner half knowing and half hypocritical, whether they were disturbing him. It was an idle question, and seemed merely to be part of a general plan for preventing him from working. Luca would answer, without turning round, that it did not matter, that they could make as much noise as they liked. He was not in the least anxious to work and this childish liveliness was yet another excuse for avoiding it.

But sometimes he felt a desire to join in these amusements, so varied and so different from his own solitary, mournful game, and getting up from his table he would open the door of the sitting room and look in. He would see a scene of disorder and of childish gaiety—chairs overturned, tables pushed aside, the governess on all fours on the carpet with a child riding on her back; and he would stand transfixed in the doorway, watching them while they went on playing just as though he were not there. Then, turning around on the floor on hands and knees with her rider on her back, the governess would look up at him with a laughing face from under the disheveled hair hanging down over her nose, asking him in her usual way whether by any chance they were disturbing him. "No . . . no . . . go ahead," Luca would answer, embarrassed: "I just looked in because I wanted a rest." But the governess had already ceased listening to him. With a vigorous shake she would free herself of her rider, who would roll laughing on the floor; then she would get up, ruffled and untidy, and proclaim in a voice of authority: "Now listen everybody . . . we'll play a completely different game . . . but listen, because I shan't explain it twice."

Luca liked the governess because she seemed to him kind and simple and gay, so unlike his mother who, filled as she was with rigid educational theories, would never have dreamed of playing with children in that manner. But a day came when this liking of his was suddenly complicated by a feeling of a different kind. One afternoon, watching her as she caracoled across the room with the little boy on her back, Luca could not help noticing the provoking roundness of her hips as she raised them in the air in an animal-like attitude, and at a movement she made as she turned round toward him his eyes, almost against his will, were attracted to her bosom which through the opening of her blouse was completely visible, including the whole contour of her very white, soft breasts. These breasts hung down like those of an animal and swayed with every movement, and Luca, though he said to himself that it was highly indiscreet to fix his eyes upon them, was quite unable to look away. At that moment she raised her face toward him, frankly intercepted his look and lifted her hand with an instinctive movement toward her breast. But her first modest impulse was arrested by some reflection, and all she did was to smooth back her hair; then, shouting and laughing, she resumed her parade across the room. Luca, noticing the movement, was sure that she had changed and modified it out of coquettishness, and at once he felt deeply disturbed. Still on all fours and with her little rider on her back, she headed for a distant corner of the room. Luca watched her and for the first time could not help thinking it unbecoming that the little boy, as he rode on her back, should beat her on the buttocks with his hands as he might have beaten the crupper of a horse. Perhaps she noticed this look of his, for she gave a sudden shake of her hips in a manner that seemed to him provoking. But this movement caused the child to roll off on to the floor; he hit his head against the corner of a cabinet and burst into tears. At once, transformed instantaneously from animal to woman, she got up, took him by the hand and led him under the lamp, asking him where he was hurt. Luca went back to his room.

During the days that followed he noticed that he rose more and more often from his table and, under one pretext or another, or without any pretext at all, went and looked in at the sitting room door. He would have liked to produce some sort of a lie to conceal the true nature of his attraction—more for his own benefit than for that of the woman, whom he guessed to be pleased by his curiosity, but unaccustomed to lying to himself, he could not find one. He recognized quite frankly that he looked in at the sitting room door in order to see the governess. And that when he looked in he hoped to see her again in that same animal-like attitude, on all fours, her hips sticking up in the air, her breasts dangling. By this time, however, to be conscious of a pleasure meant, for Luca, to hate it. Therefore, with the same passion with which he had undertaken the sacrifice of his books and his money and the ruin of his school career, he devoted himself to the destruction of this new tie.

At first he tried to gain control of himself and thrust desire from him. But he soon saw that after resisting nine times out of ten he canceled out all the success he had obtained by going the tenth time, and looking in at the door of the sitting room, in an even more awkward and transparent manner than usual. Instinctively, he tried a different method. He looked in as often as he wanted to, but sought to change the nature of the pleasure by observing the woman minutely. It had been at first a genuine though furtive pleasure, gay and thoughtless as the person who inspired it. Now his object was to introduce a new flavor, that of physical and moral disgust. He made use, unconsciously, of the same cunning that had served him in the case of the money and the books; having loved them and loved them too much he had managed to discover, in the sweet depths of that love, the bitterness of a nauseating satiety, of an injurious servitude; and this bitterness had been a powerful aid to him in getting rid of them. By looking without restraint at the woman, he sought, with a cruelty which he felt to be unjustified and more desperate than ever, to find the defect in this new pleasure of his. But this time, contrary to what had happened in the case of the books and the money, he discovered to his surprise that the tie, far from being severed, had actually become stronger.

The defect lay chiefly in the forbidden, illicit, furtive nature of his contemplation, of which he had been aware from the very beginning without attaching much importance to it. But perhaps the very quality of the pleasure he derived from his contemplation was still the strongest justification of his determination to renounce it. She was not beautiful, as he had at once realized; and this absence of a beauty which might in some way counterbalance the secrecy of desire by the openness of disinterested admiration, might also liberate him from his new bonds. How could he possibly care for those stumpy legs which, when she played at galloping round the room, were visible above the baggy stockings, right up to the luminous, cold whiteness of the thighs? And those breasts, so soft and dangling? And the buttocks, large out of all proportion, giving her a bunched-up look when she was standing, as though in that place her garments concealed not a part of her body but a cumbrous, shapeless bundle? These reflections brought him a sort of relief; she was really clumsy looking, no longer young, already going flabby, and he hoped that this clumsiness, this maturity, this flabbiness, introducing as they undoubtedly did an element of displeasure into his pleasure, would in the end restrain and deflect its progress. But this did not last long. At a second examination, when he thought he could now look at the governess without feeling disturbed, Luca discovered that she now attracted him just because she was flabby and clumsy and not very young. It was true that there still remained that bitter flavor of disgust that he had wanted deliberately to introduce, but it was no longer a matter for disgust, it was, rather, a new and more exciting cause of attraction. All this, he could not help thinking, had happened without his noticing it, by a sort of alchemy in the darkest depths of his instinct. He understood, too, that if he had been able by some miracle to transform her and make her young and beautiful, he would not have desired her so much. And so the desire of his senses had proved stronger than his desire for death, and by making ugliness attractive had brought him back in spite of himself into the life that he had wished, at all costs, to leave.

This discovery reduced him to despair, for he also realized that, if these longing glances at her hips and bosom sufficed to bring down the laborious edifice of his sacrifices, they certainly did not suffice to make him live in a positive sense. It was too late now, he thought, he had broken the threads that bound him to life and it was impossible to start over again. What sort of a life would it have been, without affections, without obligations, sustained merely by a few moments of furtive lust?

And then, as though she had guessed his thoughts, the woman herself took the initiative. She would burst into Luca's room, pulling one of the children after her, and let herself fall backward on to the bed, legs in the air, in one of their usual merry wrestling-matches; she would come and look in at his door, when the noise reached its height, in order to apologize. She did these things with boisterous assurance, laughing and joking, but it seemed to Luca that she was not as spontaneous as before. She invented a game in which it was necessary for one of the players to absent himself from the sitting room for a short time, and instead of going into the corridor she went into Luca's room, making the excuse that the corridor was cold. She left the door ajar and went close to Luca without making any noise; suddenly she leant over his shoulder, brushing his cheek with her own. "What are you working at? Latin?" "No, French." "Why, I used to teach French . . . let me see what it is . . . *Corneille*?" Her voice, cheerful as it was, seemed to Luca strangely expressionless. And when he turned slightly to answer her, he found her face almost against his own and her big, flat-set eyes gazing intently and smilingly at him. Luca noticed her cheeks sagged a little, they were dusted over with pink powder and shiny under the powder grains; he noticed that this detail pleased him just because it displeased him. Perhaps she felt that his look was cruelly penetrating; for she said, laughing: "Go on with your work!" and with a pirouette went to the door. "Can I come in now?" he heard her shout. The children cried to her to come in and she disappeared.

Next day Luca had just dozed off on the bed, when in the confusion of slumber he suddenly felt three or four gesticulating, clinging bodies fall with disagreeable violence on top of him. It was the governess and her three pupils who, chasing each other, had intentionally thrown themselves upon him. The children and the woman struggled together, laughing and shouting, and in order to free himself, Luca too started struggling. And in this scuffle he discovered that his hands, against his will, instinctively sought the woman's body; and while the children were struggling with all the impulsiveness and violence they were capable of she was apparently seeking him out—anxious to prolong the battle instead of trying to free herself. When she made a movement to shake off the children Luca found one of her legs lying across his face, and this time he was sure she had done it on purpose. It was the calf of her leg, and it bounced against his mouth like a well-turned club of light, soft flesh so that his lips, at every rebound, could feel the vibration of the muscles as she tightened them in order not to hurt him. At last she jumped up from the bed, shouting: "That's enough, everybody! . . . And now I've thought of a new game."

The children calmed down instantly, and the governess said: "Now this is the game: we'll put out all the lights and then we'll draw lots . . . All except one person will hide, and that person must look for the others in the dark and recognize them . . . but he must guess who the other person is in the dark, without speaking, just by feeling . . . Of course," she added, turning to Luca, "we must put out the light in your room too . . . and, if it doesn't bore you to play with the children, do come and play with us, just this once."

Luca, smoothing back his disheveled hair, said: "All right," and the governess concluded: "No locking yourselves in . . . and no hiding in wardrobes."

"Can we hide under the beds?" asked the little boy.

"Under the beds—yes, that's all right."

They left Luca's room and went back into the sitting room. The governess wrote down their names on bits of paper, mixed them all up and made one of the twins draw lots. "Luca," she announced, as she unfolded the paper.

Luca saw his cousins looking at him with envy. "You must stay here in this room," said the governess, "while we go and hide." Luca nodded and sat down in an armchair near the fireplace.

She went out with the children, turning off the sitting room light as she went, and then the corridor light. Sitting in the darkness Luca listened carefully, he could hear footsteps coming and going, doors opening, whispers, stifled laughter, creakings and bumps. He was completely absorbed in the game now and was trying to make out where the others were hiding. Every now and then a motorcar passing in the street outside threw on the wall a rectangle of bars of light that turned slowly toward the ceiling and then disappeared; and for a moment, in a twilight striped with vivid light, he had a glimpse of the whole room. During one of these illuminations he caught sight of a black figure standing erect in a corner, in the space between the bookshelf and the china cabinet. It was the governess; and Luca thought how cunning of her to hide in the sitting room, which because it was the most obvious place was also the last place he would have thought of. After a moment's reflection, he decided to pretend he was making a careful search in the corridor, whereas he would not really be searching at all; then he would go straight to the corner where she was hiding and shout out her name in a loud voice. He was pleased with this decision; in that way he would show her that he was more cunning than she. Meanwhile from the darkness came the silvery voice of one of the twins, announcing: "We're ready . . . you can begin."

Feeling his way carefully but swiftly he crossed the sitting room and went into the hall. There he stopped, listening. He did not want to run the risk of finding one of his cousins, and in thus preferring the governess he was conscious for the first time of an intention which had nothing to do with the game. He went over to the umbrella stand and pretended to feel about among the sticks and umbrellas. From a long way away came a piping, childish voice repeating: "You're cold . . . you're cold." Luca moved a few steps further, knocking his foot purposely against the leg of a chair, then went back into the sitting room, moving with outstretched arms for the corner where the governess stood.

He had intended to leap upon her, seize her, and immediately shout: "The signorina!" But at the last moment, and not without hypocrisy, it seemed to him that this would be finishing the game too quickly, for not the least important part of it consisted in running your hands carefully over the face of the person you had caught before you recognized him. He had reached the corner now, he stretched out his hands into the void and his fingers came into contact with the outline of a cheek. She neither moved nor breathed—a sign that she was playing her part in the game. His fingers wandered round her cheek, down along her chin towards her neck.

But then, as he touched the dimple in her chin, he suddenly realized that a second game had taken the place of the first; and this second game was not really a game at all, but the usual hankering that impelled him every day to leave his table and look into the sitting room. At this thought, a feeling of strong excitement took his breath away and made his face burn. In the meantime, with a now fully conscious hypocrisy, he continued to run his fingers over her face, as though he had difficulty in recognizing her.

He enjoyed stroking her cheeks, even though he was aware of a flabby softness; in fact, he enjoyed it particularly for that reason just as he enjoyed the complicity that joined them together, even though he felt it to be slightly ignoble. And so, he thought once again, the repugnance he felt served only to make his desire stronger and more complicated, like a fire that is fed even by the water that ought to put it out. He followed the outline of her mouth and felt under his finger tips the gentle resistance of the down that shadowed her lips and the stickiness of the greasy make-up. This contact too was both agreeable and disagreeable. From her face his fingers moved down to her neck, and Luca was reminded that she had three little folds there, like three necklaces, which made her neck feel wasted. She did not move, and Luca passed from her neck to the upper part of her breast. At this point the governess became impatient at a caress so hesitating, in which the ambiguous nature of the game was too carefully respected in spite of the darkness and of her own encouraging silence: she took hold of his hand and placed it on her bosom. Luca felt the soft, round breast that seemed under his pressure to change shape and seek to escape his hand that she pressed so frenziedly to her; and then, with the sudden eagerness of a long-restrained protest, he shouted: "The signorina!" She at once dropped his hand; there was a great hubbub, lights went on, the lamp in the sitting room was lit and the little cousins came back. "Well done, Luca!" said the governess, coming out of her corner. "He found me almost at once." The children, disappointed, started a boasting competition about the remarkable places they had hidden in, in order to comfort themselves for not having been found. The youngest said: "I hid in the cupboard where the brooms are kept . . . but there was a smell of wax there and it almost made me sneeze." The governess warned them in a severe tone: "Now don't tell us the places where you hid, or the game will be all over at once."

For a time they talked about the surprises of the game, then the governess announced: "Now it's my turn . . . but look out, hide yourselves well . . . because I know you and I'll find you in no time." She seemed very gay and thoughtless, entirely absorbed in the game. And Luca, as he looked at her, could not help marveling at her duplicity. For this seemed to be not only in her attitude toward him but to extend even to her clothes, to the white silk blouse through which she had made him feel her breast but showed not the slightest sign of crumpling as a result of that violent embrace. Going across to the electric light switch, she added: "Now I'm going to put the light out . . . Now quickly, run and hide yourselves."

It was dark again; and Luca hesitated between the two games. He might hide himself seriously, like his cousins—this was the first game; or he might wait in the corner between the bookshelf and the china cabinet until she found him—and this was the second game, so much more attractive since it was entirely made up of disagreeable things. The first game fitted in with his own permanent game and implied the rejection of this last tie of fleshly attraction and repulsion that bound him to life; the second implied its acceptance. Almost automatically, he started on tiptoe toward the corner by the bookshelf. Another car passed along the street, streaking the walls and ceiling with moving bands of light. Surely the governess, who had not yet left the room, must have seen him.

She behaved exactly as he had behaved. She went out into the corridor, pretended to bustle round and search everywhere, then came back into the sitting room. Luca knew that she was coming toward him by the glowing point of the cigarette between her lips. This red speck, like the planet Mars in a black winter sky, came closer and closer, swaying as it hung suspended at the level of her face. When it was quite near, the little blood-red star moved to the left with a sudden displacement as she took the cigarette out of her mouth. Luca followed it with his eyes and saw it descend a considerable distance; the governess was letting her arm fall to her side. But at the same time a hand slipped in behind his neck with a slow, firm movement like a snake uncoiling. Then, with a mixed smell of tobacco and lipstick, he was conscious of a warm breath on his face, followed immediately by the sensation of two lips crushing themselves against his.

Even in this kiss—the first of his life—he recognized an ambiguous quality, at once agreeable and disagreeable. The woman's lips, thick and soft, spread themselves over his lips, as though to master them, with an enfolding, circular motion which involved not only the mouth but also the chin and the base of the nostrils. Like the edges of a deep wound, these lips seemed inert and lifeless, forced to spread themselves more by the pressure of the two faces against each other than by any voluntary movement. But from the depths behind the lips came a thing full of energy, muscular, pointed, thrusting itself between Luca's teeth, unclenching them, penetrating violently into his mouth. She curled and uncurled her tongue as though she wished to explore all the intricacies not only of Luca's mouth but of his whole body and was prevented from doing so merely by the shortness of the implement she used; and its wet roughness made him think of the body of a large snail emerging from its shell. Yes, he decided on further reflection, yes, a snail, but a snail gone crazy, indefatigable even though blind, with a vibrant, self-willed vitality such as only an animal can possess. And meanwhile, as the kiss still continued, saliva issued from their confused mouths and trickled down his chin.

Luca had been expecting that she would call out his name, just as he had called hers, thus putting an end both to the game and the kiss. But without taking her mouth from his she came closer to him with a lively movement of her whole body, and he realized that though he had reached the point where, more disconcerted than attracted, he would willingly have stopped, she intended to continue. Then from the other end of the flat he heard the squeaky voice of his little cousin calling out: "You're not looking . . . You've made an agreement with Luca . . . it's not fair, it's not fair"; and in that cry he seemed to hear the voice of his own innocence at the very moment of its destruction by the fires of sensuality. The governess suddenly left him and stumbled across the room, saying in a gay voice: "Why isn't it fair? I'm still looking." Still panting, Luca took his handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his wet chin.

The governess' search did not last long. There was a cheerful clatter and Luca knew that she had found one of his cousins. As before, the lights went on and the woman and the three children came back into the sitting room. Luca was quite bewildered by his own discordant sensations. During the kiss, the feeling of repulsion had been stronger than usual, so much so that it almost completely swamped the feeling of pleasure. And yet it was that very repulsion that kindled a burning, impure flame of desire in his blood. He felt that he wanted to kiss her again, and in exactly that same way, with those same sensations. But when the lights went off again, he walked firmly out of the sitting room with a spontaneity that surprised him, and hid in the kitchen, behind the stove.

From there he could hear more than one person walking about in the corridor; besides one of the little girls who was seeking those who had hidden, there must also be the governess seeking for *him*. He was conscious of a sharp pain, as though at the destruction of some beloved living thing which he held more precious than life itself. Time passed, and the confusion in the corridor continued; she was searching for him, and he, behind the stove, felt a strong desire to go to her and take her in his arms. The kitchen door opened, and Luca, filled with joy, seemed already to feel her hand against his cheek. But at the same moment there broke out the usual delighted clatter; the little girl had found her brother. "Ah, you were there," said the governess, as she turned on the light and looked at him from the doorway with an expression at the same time both sly and disappointed.

This time, however, the game came to an unexpected end, as children's games generally do, in sudden boredom and confusion. The little boy was complaining that he had hit his head against a cupboard, and a quarrel broke out between the twins, one of whom burst into tears. For a short time Luca stood watching the governess who, taking no notice of him, but gay and lively all the time, was calling her pupils to order; then, seeing that the game was really over, he went to his room and threw himself, in the dark, on his bed.

For some time he could hear the four of them laughing, chasing each other and moving furniture in the sitting room. Finally he dropped off to sleep; but at a sudden silence woke up and saw the door opening and the governess, in a streak of light, coming into the room. In the sitting room the children were talking quietly, a sign that they were getting dressed to go away. She came up to the bed and bent over him, saying: "Were you asleep?"

"Yes," answered Luca, half rising.

"Why don't you come and see me at my place?" she went on, in a low voice. "I don't go to your aunt's on Sundays . . . come and see me next Sunday."

"Where is it?" Luca asked mechanically.

Softly she told him the address, in a confidential voice in which nothing of her accustomed gaiety remained. Then she bent down and for one moment, in a very swift contact between their two mouths, Luca felt again all the sensations of the former, longer kiss. "I'm coming, I'm coming," she shouted as she flung herself toward the door. Luca let himself fall back upon the bed.

THAT had been on Thursday. More than once during the following three days Luca decided to go and not to go, to yield to love and to reject it. There were a number of reasons—all the reasons, in fact—in favor of accepting; for rejecting there was no reason except that desperate desire to destroy the things that bound him to life—and that was not so much a reason as a point of honor which had an obscure origin and growth in the most secret depths of his spirit. He perceived that the governess with her love desired him to live neither more nor less than his parents with their gifts, or his teacher, with his tasks. This love was pleasing to his senses, just as his parents' gifts were pleasing to his covetousness and his teacher's tasks to his ambition. They were all on the same level—his mother, his father, his teacher, the governess—all trying to drag him into the midst of life, to impose life upon him, to compromise him with life; and it mattered little if the methods were different and if his father and mother and the teacher would have disapproved of the methods adopted by the governess.

The thing that irritated him most was that the hunger of his senses should so easily overthrow his desire for liberation and death. At that time the two cats that belonged to the house, a male and a female, had entered upon their love period. This had happened before, but Luca, apart from watching them with amusement, had paid little attention. Now, after what had happened between him and the governess, he seemed to recognize himself in the male and her in the female. Just like these two animals, which at one moment followed each other round, sniffing, then faced each other, staring and miaowing, then jumped on each other, the tomcat seizing the other by the neck with his teeth, the female prostrating herself under the male in the same way he himself, unconsciously obedient to the commands of instinct, had behaved toward the woman. All those comings and goings between his own room and the sitting room, those contacts, that invention of pretexts that would lead to contacts—what else were they but the mutual pursuit of two animals mysteriously troubled by desire? With this difference, however, that the two cats could not rebel against nature because they consisted of nothing but nature; whereas he resented this obedience as an act of humiliating passivity, and the force which imposed it as a tyranny. Furthermore, if he yielded to his senses what reason would he have for neglecting his lessons, for rejecting the joys of possession and vanity, for repudiating affection, for not, in fact, deciding once and for all to play a part in that ready-made world into which his mother, in giving him birth, had introduced him?

He was still hesitating when Sunday arrived. In the morning Luca had decided not to visit the governess; by the time lunch was over he had changed his mind. Conscious at heart of a vague feeling of self-contempt, he announced to his mother that he was going to the movies, and went out. But after a few steps he realized his legs were carrying him in the wrong direction. At the top of the street, against a background of trees, rose the baroque gateway of the public gardens toward which, idly, in the bland light of that early winter afternoon, the first Sunday strollers were making their way. Allowing himself to be drawn along by the sight of the gateway, he went into the garden.

He had not been there since the day he buried the money, almost a month ago, and the nakedness and silence of winter had taken full possession. Only the ilexes had kept their foliage, foliage of an opaque green that gave the impression of ancient metal, cold to the touch; all the other trees raised toward the sky gray, broomlike tufts of straight branches upon which could be seen, here and there, a few tiny yellow leaves which had stuck to the tree by mere inertia. The lawns were bare and parched with not a blade of grass upon them, the seats were deserted, the white marble statues had absorbed the rainwater and revealed, in their dark dampness, the jointures between the many fragments of which they were composed. A green scum, no longer cleft by the toy boats of the children, covered the water in the basins of the fountains. Luca walked along an avenue on earthy gravel that no longer crunched beneath his feet, crossed the big lawn, partly flooded now with wide pools reflecting the sky, and through the grove of trees, reaching the open space. There was the decorative wall with its niches and columns and inscriptions. There was the shady spot, glossy with dead leaves, where he had buried the money. He sat down on an upturned stone capital and looked around.

He felt himself to be in the grip of an uneasy anxiety, but he was not sorry to feel this because it seemed to keep him from thinking about the governess and from the temptation of going to see her. It was the fantastic uneasiness of irresolution, which enormously exaggerates the alternatives of a dilemma but at the same time makes them appear indistinct and unattainable and which contents itself with merely formulating them, appearing to take satisfaction in an inertia which is not concerned with making a choice. Certainly he wanted to go and see the governess, and equally certainly he did not want to; but he felt that what pleased him most was neither the one nor the other but what lay in the middle between them—this immobility, this apathy, this dim and muffled peace. He knew that if he faced the temptation actively and frankly, it would utilize the very strength of his opposition and turn it to its own advantage. And so the only thing to do was to quell any possible conflict, to remain quiescent.

But he knew why he had come back to this open space in the gardens. Just as a believer comes back to the temple of his religion in order to strengthen himself in his faith, so by visiting again the place of his most solemn sacrifice, he had wanted to convince himself of the impossibility of turning back from that sacrifice. Consecrated by his sacrifice, the natural temple of a religion in which he alone believed and about which he was totally ignorant, this open space exercised an influence upon his mind. And after a long and mysterious pause, it seemed to him he could see, far away, the figure of the governess, as though she had been a halting-place, now left far behind, on a visible path. How could he ever, for the sake of one or two kisses, have placed in jeopardy all that had constituted the desperate principle of this last period of his life? He thought of his money, and thought with extreme repugnance of the possibility of going, avariciously, and digging it up, and putting it in his pocket again and buying sweets or cigarettes with it. But he would have performed the same act of self-betrayal if he had gone to see the woman. She was expecting him at her own home, just as his parents expected him at mealtime and his schoolfellows and teachers at school. They all conspired to favor his weakness. What was there left for him to do, if he were to retain his honesty, but to disappoint them?

Meanwhile time was passing. He noticed the light had become perceptibly less. Through the windows in the wall behind him two or three distant roars reached his ears, and he remembered that it was the lions' feeding time. At the sound of that roaring he imagined he could see the gray cement cages, clean but strangely fetid, with their close black bars and behind the bars the huge, shaggy masses of the crouching lions. He seemed to see the small door open at the end of the long corridor beside the cages, and the keeper, in his gray-striped uniform, come through it, pushing by its bars a small cart full of bleeding joints of meat. He hooks one of them on the end of a long pole and throws it from above to the beast which has risen, roaring, to its feet. The red carrion falls with a wet plop on the floor of the cage and the lion is instantly upon it, seizing it with its claws and tearing it to pieces. He crunches the bones in his teeth, pausing every now and then in his meal to lick the carcass amorously with his rasping tongue, as though kissing it. Luca shuddered at the thought of that piece of flesh, once part of a living animal and now a mere dead, shapeless lump, and, remembering how he had once been told that death in the jaws of a wild beast was almost painless owing to that strange, unconscious pity on the part of the beast itself which takes special care to break the victim's spine, he thought he would like to die in that way—to be seized, killed, devoured. The idea attracted him because in such a death there was a fascinating ruthlessness, more complete than in any death at the hands of a man because unconscious and innocent. It was a death in which man became something other than man, in which he was transformed into food for a starving beast. And this blind and nameless hunger was a worthy sepulchre for a rejected body which could have nothing to do with the world and with mankind, not even through the pity of a tear-stained grave.

But above all he was pleased at the idea of the humiliation inflicted upon human dignity by this use of the human body as food. He remembered that the feeding of the lions in the zoo had always been connected, in his own imagination, with the confused feelings inspired in him by the reading of certain novels concerned with martyrdom, particularly *Fabiola* and *Quo Vadis*. This human dignity, composed entirely of petty honors and repulsive duties, that he hated so much, could not be more completely denied than by placing the human body on the level of butcher's meat. He was reminded of the young virgin, beautiful and of noble birth, who, in one of these books, had been exposed naked to the wild beasts: after she had remained for a long time miraculously unharmed, a lion attacked her and with one blow of its claws tore off her arm; then, still living, she was devoured by the hungry beasts; and there came back to him the feeling of pity he had experienced on reading this episode. But this time the feeling of pity was for himself, as he saw himself thrown down and torn to pieces in place of the young woman. It was the same feeling of pity that had moved him when he had imagined himself murdered and buried in the public gardens; and, in suggesting to him a new picture of his own death, it clarified and confirmed its significance—as of a ritual sacrifice, holy, necessary, inevitable.

He started up as he saw that night had already fallen. He felt frozen from head to foot and he was aware, suddenly, that in truth he was nothing more than a boy who had stayed out later than usual. As he went off down the darkening avenues, in the twilight beneath the trees, he heard the cry of the park keeper, "Closing time . . . closing time"—coming thin and mournful to his ears like a summons back to the world of home and school that he so much hated; and for a moment he thought of staying in the gardens and spending the night in the open space, in company with himself and the shadows of the trees. But his courage failed him, and he went out through the gateway. Now, however, he was afraid of being unable to resist the governess next day, when he saw her again and she provoked him afresh with her tricks.

BUT next day the governess did not come, because, as he learned from his mother that same evening, his aunt was well again and there was no need for the children to be sent away from the house. Luca was aware of a feeling of disappointment, which he attributed at first to surprise—the surprise of a man who has prepared himself for a fight and then finds, at the last moment, that the fight is not going to take place after all. But later he understood that the disappointment was of a different nature; what he really wanted was to see her again. This desire, simple and direct as a natural appetite, frightened him because it proved that he still clung to life and its doubtful gifts.

After his mother had given him the news, five days went by and Luca hoped that he had forgotten the governess. But on the Sunday morning, as he walked past the telephone, he stopped and almost mechanically dialed her number. She answered him at once, as though she had been waiting all those days at the other end of the wire. "You didn't come last Sunday," she said.

"I couldn't," Luca answered; "did you wait for me?"

"Yes, I waited for you . . . but not for long." It seemed to him that her voice was not so gay as usual. And now there could be no further question of resisting the temptation. He asked in a low voice: "Can I come today?"

She seemed to be reflecting for a moment; and then she replied: "No, not today . . . I really don't feel at all well."

"I understand," said Luca, in an incredulous, angry tone.

She went on immediately, as though frightened: "It's quite true . . . I don't feel well . . . but come next Sunday—can you manage next Sunday?"

"Yes," said Luca.

"All right—till next Sunday, then."

During the whole week Luca, putting aside completely all inclination toward resistance and sacrifice, did nothing but think of the governess. He thought of her with a profound agitation in which were mixed the sharp desire of the senses and the raging bewilderment of defeat. There was certainly no more question of dying—nor yet of living, unless living meant this state of vexation and anguish. Like a swirling, muddy torrent that allows a man neither to swim nor to rest his foot on dry land, passion dragged him far away from his former resolutions. Everything appeared to him to have lost its substance and importance except the woman whom imagination never ceased to exhibit to him in an inexhaustible variety of flattering and disturbing manifestations. The thing that he had so much feared was now happening—that he would find an interest in life again; but after the destruction of so much, it was a life that was reduced to a mere sting of lust, with no hope of expanding into a wider, more positive feeling. For he realized that he did not love, and would never love, this woman, knowing himself to be drawn to desire her by a narrow, purely animal, instinct. How far removed now was he from the clarity of vision he had attained during his last visit to the open space in the gardens! Neglecting his work, eating and sleeping little, his senses perpetually in a ferment and mind filled with nausea, he waited impatiently for those seven days to pass. On the Sunday, after telling his mother the usual lie about going to the cinema, he left home early.

The governess lived in an old quarter of the town, between the station and the barracks. At the ends of the long streets could be seen black and white sentry boxes and the iron gates of barrack enclosures, and beyond the gates the wide barrack squares surrounded with dusty eucalyptus trees, and above, the white sky. Distant, mournful bugles sounded the call to mess, without any visible response; an air of utter boredom spread outward from the iron gates and rose like a fog over the deserted streets. As he walked hastily through those streets, beside the tall buildings that lined them, he felt his legs giving way beneath him and loathed the impulse that drove him on to make this visit. This quarter of employees' dwellings seemed to him all at once hypocritical: how many other women were hiding behind these ornate, dusty façades as they waited for their lovers or clutched them in their arms? He felt that in spite of his agitation he was doing a perfectly normal thing in going to see the governess, precisely, in fact, the thing that the falsely dignified appearance of the quarter seemed to suggest; and that in the acceptance of this contemptible normality lay the whole of his defeat. It was the normal thing, he reflected, to do one's lessons, to save some money, to have a stamp collection, and finally, at the appropriate age, to go and visit one's mistress in a quarter such as this. He found the house he was looking for not far from the barrack gates. The main door was open, and at the far end of the entrance hall there was an old-fashioned stained-glass window with big lozenges of red and blue. His heart swelling with disgust, his legs trembling, he started up the staircase.

He went up two, three, four floors, stopping at each landing to examine the name-plates. All the time he was thinking of the governess' home and, remembering that her father, who had been dead for years, had been a state official of some distinction, he pictured a series of small, narrow rooms, crammed with all sorts of knick-knacks. She would entice him to a shabby sofa in the far corner of one of these little rooms, and from the moment of their first kiss, would remind him, with her indefatigable tongue, of an infuriated snail. Then there would be sweets and cigarettes, languishing looks and jokes; and finally he would be lying on top of her, at once reluctant and awkward, in a confusion of garments tossed aside like the surf that marks a shipwreck. She would send him away with a last kiss in the darkness of a narrow hall filled with overcoats. He would go home again, both the betrayer and the betrayed. All this filled him with profound repugnance; but, as usual, because it was repugnant it attracted him.

When the maid opened the door he was astonished at the pungent, stuffy smell from the hall that smote his face like a hot breath. The maid ushered him in and left him standing there. At the far end of the hall a reddish light came from a lamp apparently wrapped in a cloth of that color. On the other hand the passage leading off the hall was plunged in darkness, and it seemed to him he could hear muffled sobs coming from that direction. The whole house seemed to be permeated by some inexplicable, sorrowful agitation—light, hurried footsteps, moans, rustling garments, creaking doors. He could even distinguish, in the distance, a monotonous voice in prayer. And the smell, the smell that was so pungent in his nostrils, was the smell of disinfectants, of sleep, of sweat; he remembered the same smell in his mother's room years ago during an illness. A tearful voice close beside him made him start. "Who is it? What do you want?" it said.

In front of him in the darkness, her face and breast catching a blood-red glint from the lamp, stood a fat old woman in black. A big tuft of white hair rose up from her forehead, like a plume of feathers, with an almost comic effect. Luca looked into her face and saw, even beneath the red glint of the lamp, her eyes and her whole face appeared to be inflamed with another, a different, a more fiery red. She repeated her question again and took a step forward, placing herself outside the halo of the lamp. Then, in that uncertain half-light, Luca saw that the redness of her face had remained, and realized that it was the redness of tears shed in despair and spread all over her face by a soaking, inadequate handkerchief.

Mortified, he spoke his own name, adding hurriedly the lie that he had come to ask for news. The old woman muttered some reply that Luca did not understand, ending with: "She's sick—she's terribly sick"; then she shook her head and disappeared into the darkness from which she had come. Behind the old woman Luca noticed for the first time a white figure that seemed to support her—a nurse. Half closing the door, he went out on to the landing.

He hurried home, ran into his room and threw himself upon the bed. It was not so much pity for the governess, whom he did not love and who had been simply the occasion of his desire, that he felt now, but rather hatred against himself, or at least against that part of himself which had inflicted upon him the humiliation of that indecent chase across the town; ending in so mortifying a manner by his finding a death agony where he had expected a lovers' meeting. And so, he could not help thinking, this was what it meant to live, to go on living—doing, with passion and determination, absurd, senseless things for which it was impossible to find any justification and which continually placed the person who did them in a state of slavery, of remorse, of hypocrisy. He recognized now the wisdom of his reflections of two Sundays ago, in the open space at the gardens, a wisdom which was perhaps desperate, but was the only one possible. With the exception of this wisdom which demanded the sacrifice of his life, all else was contradiction and obscurity.

He felt that the actual facts had taught him, mutely, a kind of lesson and had pointed again to the right road, from which he had been led astray by his desires. It was like a piece of music, that scene of confusion and death in the governess' home, like a motif interrupted for a short time by other, contrasting sounds and then taken up again with greater intensity, on a higher, firmer note. It was the motif that had been sounding in his ears for a long time, and that he had done wrong to forget. A motif that was profound, deep-toned, funereal, full of sadness, but at the same time bewitching and peculiarly his own.

"And supposing the governess doesn't die?" he asked himself, with an experimental curiosity. Then, observing that, at the mere mention of such a hope, his senses were reawakened, he was seized, all over again and more strongly than ever, with hatred against himself. He was not even capable of wanting the governess to live for her own sake; she must live and die only for him. This too was what living meant, he reflected; and it was in that way his parents understood life, and his teachers and everyone else. Immediately he felt that he wanted her to die; and that he was able to feel this only at the cost of wanting, even more urgently, to die himself.

HIS parents, speaking of it casually at table with expressions of conventional pity, gave Luca the news of the governess' death two days after his visit to her home. "She was a good creature," said his mother; "so gay . . . who would have thought it?" His father affirmed, too, that he would never have imagined that a person so full of life could have met such an early death. And the conversation, after a few more comments of the same kind, passed to another subject.

Luca had hoped that her death would inspire him with a feeling, if not of pity, at least of liberation. He discovered, instead, that he continued to think of her with desire and longing, just as when she was alive. As far as he could understand the matter, the sensations awakened in him by this woman seemed to have been hoarded greedily by his sensual memory so they might be doled out, day by day, in the small change of recollection—anyhow until some other woman occupied the dead woman's place in his heart. He was reminded of how, as a child, he had once shut up a live lizard in a box; but the creature had died, and he had insisted on keeping the corpse for several days, until his mother, sickened by the smell, had taken it from him and thrown it away, to his great disgust, for he thought he possessed some remarkable treasure. In the same way, with the same jealous, miserly care, did his memory preserve those two or three amorous sensations which the governess had bequeathed to him and which now smelled of death. And so, to the funereal color that tinged his whole life there was now added the dark shadow of an irresistible necrophilia. And what made it worse than other similar loves for the dead was the fact that he had no idealized love for the complete figure of the governess, but merely, in a sensual manner, for one particular part of her, the only part that had been, for him, alive and effectual—that mouth which now, as he sometimes found himself thinking, must be filled with earth, and which could no longer retain any resemblance to a mouth. In fact he neither remembered nor knew anything of her beyond the kiss that he had received from her; and that kiss, like a smell or a taste which is revivified at even the slightest call of memory, came back to him at every moment not so much in the manner of an obsession as of something that has already become habitual, with the vicious regularity of the most mechanical type of thought. It was a wretched, dismal treasure, but he was preparing to live for years upon its revenue. Sometimes at night he would wake up suddenly with the sensation that her mouth was emerging slowly but surely from his pillow, as a flower emerges from the earth, the linen turning into flesh and the flesh, nevertheless, preserving the quality of linen. He would bite hard into his pillow and, until he was quite wide awake, would, with his teeth on edge, grip the cold, saliva-soaked stuff, clinging with all his strength to this hopelessly improbable, but at the same time violently concrete, illusion. So the old mixture of disgust and pleasure continued. This time, however, the disgust was no longer that of a love furtive and impure but partly justified by the woman's eager participation; it was that of a macabre attachment to ragged scraps of a memory cut short by death. It filled all his thoughts with a dreary listlessness. And it brought at the same time, as he realized, a gradual perversion to his senses that were continually oscillating between desire and repulsion. The sensation of the kiss and the idea of death became mingled and fused in a single, obscure excitement which seemed to draw its strength from the deep, overshadowing darkness of impossibility and profanation.

So continued the struggle against the things which bound him to life; and chance had willed that those things were now reduced to the mutilated, shapeless memory of a person who was dead. It was a memory, he sometimes reflected, that with time would undergo the same process of disintegration as the flesh which had produced it; and, like that flesh in the earth in which it was buried, so, with extreme slowness, would decompose in the blackest mud deposit of his mind, but not before he had nourished his life upon it for many years, evoking it and relishing it again and again, as long as it was possible. In order to sever this bond and place himself, once and for all, outside the orbit of this memory, he took the streetcar one morning to the cemetery instead of going to school.

He thought vaguely of buying some flowers and scattering them upon the governess' grave—with the idea of propitiating her and of asking her to leave him finally in peace. But, on that cold, misty morning, the cypresses rising above the grey wall of the cemetery at once gave him the feeling that it was a place of convention and show in which any mystery was already discounted in advance. The open iron gates led into the cemetery from a space surrounded by flower stalls. Beyond the gates could be seen the burial ground, like a public garden which, ridiculously, had been planted with crosses instead of flowers. These crosses, as he looked dreamily at them from the open space outside the gates, seemed to be moving confusedly in a whirling geometrical pattern from which all idea of death was excluded. Around him, people were getting off of crowded streetcars, swarming over the open space, buying flowers, moving gently, with unhurried steps, toward the gates. The mortuary chapel, standing conveniently beside the cemetery, with its portico and pediment in colored mosaics, seemed to invite gestures of prearranged, unmysterious piety. This, he could not help thinking, this was a place for the living to perform their ceremonies with perfunctory decorum and smoothness, not a place for the dead. He noticed that below the wall the ground, cracked and tawny in color, sloped steeply away; and that at the top of this slope three tramps were warming themselves around a bonfire—which he at once imagined, for some reason, to have been kindled with refuse from the cemetery, fragments of bone, rags from rotting garments, splinters from coffins. Tongues of flame flickered red in the cold and misty air, and from the flames a column of smoke rose in yellow spirals up the wall, reaching as far as the inclined, motionless tops of the cypresses. At the sight of these flames there came back to his mind the idea of a death shorn of ceremony and pity—like the deaths he had once pictured at the hands of a murderer or in the jaws of a wild beast—a death which served to warm the hands of three ragged beggars, standing in sight of surburban houses, standing beside the streetcar lines. He realized it was useless to go into the cemetery; the woman was in his memory, in his senses, not beneath the marble slab which bore her name. In face of that slab of stone he, like the others, would have performed empty, senseless gestures; or, on the other hand, in order to bring her to mind, would have had to summon up those very memories that he wished to drive away. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a streetcar appear at the corner of the avenue, and ran, at full speed, to the platform. A few minutes later he was home.

In his room he dropped off to sleep, as usual; and then woke with a violent start which recalled to his mind another similar shock given him by the governess when she had deliberately fallen on top of him in her pretended game with her pupils. It was she, there could be no doubt of it; and the sensation of that kiss seemed to be emerging, more intense than ever, from the stuff of his pillow. It seemed that the whole of the night that enveloped him was expressive of that mouth of hers, that the darkness itself formed lips and a tongue in a sultry, crackling silence that was filled with an inescapable presence. There was a kind of malicious scorn in this return of the governess after the failure of his expedition to the cemetery; it was as though she wished to inform him, with all the gaiety and boisterousness that had been hers in life, of the vanity of his attempts to set himself free. As though she wished to say to him in her cheerful manner, falling on top of him and kissing him: "You thought I was dead . . . far from it . . . I'm more alive than ever . . . and *you've* got to live—for *me*!" He raised himself on his elbow, enjoying the flavor of the sensation and thinking deeply. It was clear to him that henceforward he would sink, more and more deeply every day, into a darkness from which there was no escape. He was aware that this was not in the least displeasing to him; each step would in fact carry him farther forward toward that ritual sacrifice of himself he had had a presentiment of on that far-off Sunday in the open spaces among the ilexes. From that sacrifice, expressing the obscure but spontaneous religion of his life, would come his liberation—not from a few flowers and a genuflection and the prayer of a hackneyed rite.

ONE morning, as he hurried out of the house on his way to school, he detected in his mind a presentiment that some conclusion was imminent. It took the form of a suspension of the thought-process and its lucid workings, of an anxious apprehension of some event which, though it had not yet happened, was already facing him, settled and inevitable. He was conscious of a slight, pleasing excitement; it was as though he felt himself to be no longer united and indivisible, but separated into a number of parts which floated about and bobbed up and down beside each other, clustered all together in a becalmed stillness, like broken fragments from a shipwreck in the quiet that follows a storm. He noticed he saw things through different eyes than usual; or rather, he did not see them but made himself master of them by means of an altogether new sense which he could not locate and which seemed to be distributed all over his body. Simultaneously, he was aware of a bitter, unreasonable sadness, a sadness of resignation that made his acts wearisome and conscious, as though each act was an irrevocable step upon a fatal path.

The weather was bad but still undecided, with a low, dark sky which had not yet resolved to shed the rain which burdened it. Occasionally a gust of damp wind stirred the mild, motionless air; then Luca would see all the leaves of the trees in the gardens turn over with a flash of silver, while coils of gray dust rose hissing at the street corners from the dry stones of the pavements. But the wind would fall again at once, and the paving stones remained dry. It was a kind of weather that resembled his own state of mind, and it seemed to him they were like each other in the way they both waited for something to happen. In the end, possibly, it would rain; in the end, possibly, he would come to a decision. He felt that it was for him that the sky had clouded over so threateningly; and that he must keep his eye on it in the way that one actor keeps his eye on another so as not to miss the moment when he has to make his appearance on the stage.

The thing that struck him most forcibly was the new feeling that the most ordinary actions gave him—such as walking through the streets, paying for his trolley ticket, getting out of the streetcar. They were the same actions he had performed for so many years on his way to school, except that where as in the past he had performed them without noticing, being carried along while he was performing them by an unceasing current of different preoccupations and thoughts, today, in the utter bareness of his life, the whole of his consciousness, for lack of any other object, was centered upon them; and he felt their ordinariness as an absurd, tyrannical strangeness. This consciousness was concerned not so much with the ultimate object of these actions—such as going to school, which had already seemed absurd to him for a long time—as with the actions themselves taken separately; it was this that was new. Why did he move his legs, why did he avoid being run over by a bus, why did he stop and rearrange the pack of books under his arm, why did he pull his hat down on to his forehead? It was as though ordinary life, reduced by now to a thin envelope of habits which had become automatic and were for that precise reason all the more tedious, were about to slip away from him once and for all, as a snake casts its skin in springtime. And with this sense of the total absurdity of all that up till then had never been absurd, he recognized that the long course of his crisis was coming to an end. There was nothing more to be done but give a slight shake and the irksome membrane would drop away. He guessed that this shake, and nothing else, was the object of his presentiment.

In front of the school building a black crowd of schoolboys was growing visibly smaller each moment as it was quickly sucked in through the ancient gray jaws of the big gateway. He was only just in time, he could not help thinking; and this thought too seemed to him perfectly ordinary—or, in other words, tyrannical and objectionable. Inside the school it was almost dark and the torrent of boys which swiftly flooded the hall, dividing into so many smaller streams, one for each corridor, seemed to Luca to be imbued with a crazy, nervous gaiety, as though his companions were nursing the same presentiments as himself. He reached the door of his own classroom, then he was in the classroom itself, with the professorial chair standing at the far end between two large maps and the three close rows of desks which —just as the chair brought to mind the image of the professor in the act of teaching—themselves suggested the rows of schoolboys intent on listening to him. All was preordained: he was already sitting at his desk although the desk was vacant, and his companions were already seated too, though they were crowding round him, and the teacher had already mounted the platform although he had not yet arrived. The lights were on because the bad weather made it so dark, and the dirty panes in the big windows reflected their thin yellow filaments. Luca went to his desk and around him the other boys arranged themselves in their own places. And now the absurd automatism of his own actions came back to him, and he felt a conscientious desire to give that slight shake in order to see what would happen. The professor of Italian, a small, well-groomed man with a plump, white face, entered and walked across the room, scattering silence and attention as he went to his desk. He mounted the platform and turned to face his class, who had risen to their feet. "Sit down," said the professor. And then, with that sensation of taking the plunge that initiates a game, Luca remained standing.

The professor, meanwhile, had sat down; he rubbed his hands together, took a clean handkerchief from his pocket, unfolded it, blew his nose, replaced the handkerchief and arranged himself more comfortably in his chair—all without taking his eyes off the school register that lay open on his desk. Luca could not help thinking that if he had been in the place of the professor he would have regarded it as an intolerable tyranny to perform those gestures which were repeated every morning, themselves the prelude to other gestures which, again, were always the same. In the meantime he still remained on his feet. The professor, having examined the register, looked up at the classroom, saw Luca and asked quietly: "What is it, Mansi?"

"Shall I, or shall I not, answer?" Luca wondered. Then he said in a clear voice: "Nothing."

"If it's nothing, then sit down." The professor had an ugly voice, cold and precise; it was obvious, nevertheless, that he liked to hear himself speak.

This time Luca did not open his mouth, and he remained standing. The professor, slightly surprised, looked at him and then repeated: "Did you hear? Sit down."

Again there was silence. The whole class was now looking at Luca with breathless astonishment. The professor stared at him, and added, in a softened voice: "Is there anything you want to say?"

"I've nothing to say," answered Luca, and suddenly sat down. A sigh of relief passed over the class. The professor eyed Luca closely for a moment and then, without saying a word, turned back to his register. The lesson was on the *Purgatorio* of Dante, and the professor's usual custom was to choose one of the boys who had good diction and make him read a *canto*, or part of a *canto*, aloud. Then his commentary would follow. The professor's finger ran down the list of names in the register, and Luca was almost sure that it would be himself who would be chosen as reader on this occasion. There were three reasons for this: first, because he read extremely well; second, because it was some time since he had been called upon to read; third—and this was the chief reason—the little incident that he had caused by remaining on his feet had, so to speak, marked him out among the crowd of his fellows and drawn the professor's attention to him.

The professor's finger could be seen running down the first column of names; then it stopped at the beginning of the second. "Mansi," he said.

Another professor, thought Luca, would have perhaps added some joke or witty remark connecting the incident with the summons to read aloud—some such phrase as: "Seeing that you're so fond of standing on your feet, you'd better come up here and read." But this professor was serious and never made jokes. He was one of those teachers who despise their profession and teach in a condescending, detached manner, though with scrupulous care, as if they wished it to be understood that they could do better if they chose. Now, however, for Luca it was a question of deciding whether he was going to obey the summons.

His desk-neighbor was anxiously handing him the volume of the *Divina Commedia*, already open at the right place, while the professor was quietly turning over the pages of his own copy. Teachers and schoolfellows, thought Luca, they all wanted him to live, to go on living. The thought of the governess came into his mind and he felt himself strengthened in his own decision. For the moment he would obey; but as soon as the feeling of the ordinariness of his own actions came over him again, then he would disobey. He realized that it was only by giving this disobedience the mechanical, punctilious character of a game that he would have the strength to carry it through. He took the book, left his desk which was one of the last at the back of the room, and walked toward the platform.

He noticed that the light had grown visibly dimmer. The first drops of rain were flying against the windowpanes, flattening themselves into broad liquid patches from which other smaller drops trickled down in brilliant lines. Suddenly he saw himself walking calmly toward the platform, book in hand. And at the same moment he stopped.

He stood still, the raindrops streaked the windowpanes, the professor and the class looked at him. At last the professor asked: "Well, what are you doing, standing there like a post?"

Luca was now wondering how long he would be able to stand there like that without incurring a punishment. But even a punishment seemed to him preferable to the usual automatic obedience. With a punishment, at least, the profoundly coercive nature of life was fully revealed, with no more hypocritical pretences. Then he heard the professor repeat, in the silence: "I'm speaking to you . . . answer me . . . do you feel ill?"

A confused murmur ran through the room, cut short immediately by the professor tapping with his ruler on the desk and shouting: "Silence!" But it was time now. With an effort Luca said, "It's nothing"; and felt that his legs were carrying him forward toward the platform. Again there was a whisper of low voices, and for the second time the professor commanded silence, but without tapping the ruler and in a less imperious tone of voice. Then he turned toward Luca and said shortly:

"Read from line 85 of Canto V." Luca lowered his eyes to his book and began:

Then said another: "Prithee, and so be that desire
Satisfied which draws thee up the lofty mount
With kindly pity help my desire.
I was of Montefeltro, I am Buonconte . . ."

Luca had always been an excellent reader; and the professor, at the sound of his voice reading calmly and with expression, seemed to become calm again himself. And a breath of relief passed through the class, too, in the darkening air. Luca went on reading in a strong, clear voice. In the meantime, however, his mind, as though endowed with a new sense of ubiquity, jumped, so to speak, out of his head and went to the other end of the schoolroom, where, along the wall, hung hats and coats; and from there it looked at him. And thus began again that feeling, at the same time both painful and pleasant, of ordinariness seen under an aspect of strangeness and oppression. Yet he seemed to be reading with vigor, following the meaning of the words which was curiously in harmony with his own feeling. He remembered those many times that he had desired and wooed a death that should be secret, unknown, solitary, obscure. And at the lines:

There where its name is lost,
Did I arrive, pierced in the throat,
Flying on foot, and bloodying the plain.
There lost I vision, and ended my words
Upon the name of Mary; and there fell I,
And my flesh alone was left . . .

a sudden feeling of obscure, distorted pity clutched at his throat. It was the pity toward himself that had moved him the first time he had thought of being killed and buried in the public gardens; and it rose to the surface of his consciousness like a summons to a grave and melancholy, but inevitable, duty. He went on reading in a voice that was less firm, but deep and full of feeling. The idea that it was a game persisted in the form of a desire to be obstinate and disobedient; but it was strangely mixed now with that sharp, surprising sense of pity. He read a few lines more and then wondered whether he should continue, knowing well that the putting of that question to himself meant that he was going to stop. And, in fact, at the line "Then when day was spent, he covered the valley with mist . . ." he broke off.

There was a moment's silence. "Well?" asked the professor. Throughout the room there had fallen the breathless quiet that awaits some unusual event. Everyone was looking at him and the professor. But Luca no longer either saw or heard anything. He was thinking that he was Buonconte, lying dead at the joining of two rivers. He seemed to see rain-burdened clouds driven by the breath of an icy wind, coming in gray drifts from the invisible top of the mountain down to where he lay, wrapping his body in silence and mist. Then, through the mist, it began to rain upon him and all around him; and the rain riddled the soaked ground and spread, in boiling whirlpools, into a lake of swollen, rioting water which joined the swell of a flooded river, and rising, lifted his half-submerged body and carried it away. And as the dense rain continued, he slipped down through the raging waters, flat on his back, his arms outspread He felt a sudden, sharp pain; and hearing his name spoken, raised his eyes; two tears slid down his cheeks.

The professor was looking at him with contemptuous surprise: "May we be allowed to know what is happening?" he asked. "Are you going to read, or are you not?"

It was clear then, thought Luca, he must go on being a schoolboy right up to the end; even if he wanted to die. He waited a moment and then asked: "Am I to go on?"

An intense chatter of criticism ran through the darkened classroom. The professor made a sign for the class to be silent, then turned to Luca and said: "Where d'you think you are? Of course you're to go on."

His emotion persisted; the tears had stopped halfway down his cheeks and were tickling him disagreeably. "I shall read down to the end of the Buonconte episode," thought Luca, "because it's *my* episode . . . Then I shall stop." He pulled himself together and started to read again, in a voice made stronger and clearer by the intimate certainty that he was describing the death, not of a character from Dante, but of himself. It seemed to him that the professor was not so much listening to him as looking at him with curiosity. The other boys, too, looked as though they expected some new strangeness on his part. He read two more stanzas without stumbling, and then, as he had foreseen, at the line ". . . then covered and wrapped me with its spoils," he stopped again.

This time the whole class burst out in a confused clatter of voices that were almost exultant though at the same time alarmed. The professor made no attempt to calm the tumult; but, turning toward Luca, said, in his normal voice: "You're not well . . . get your things on and go home . . . we'll talk about it later, in a few days."

"I'm all right," Luca would have liked to answer; but he felt a shiver run all over his body, followed by a wave of damp, feverish heat, and he saw that perhaps the professor was right. And so, he reflected, if you don't agree to be what other people want or believe you to be, you either get punished or you're thought to be ill. This reflection absorbed him while he gathered the books that his neighbor, with pitying, alarmed solicitude, took from under the desk and handed to him one by one. Everyone was looking at him in silence. The rain was streaming down the windowpanes now; and Luca could not help saying to himself that it was the same rain which he had seen, in imagination, enveloping and carrying away his own lifeless body. He took the books under his arm and went toward the back of the classroom. Thirty heads turned to watch him as he went. "Loiacono," said the professor, calling on another of the class. Luca took his overcoat, opened the door and went out.

He hurried through the deserted corridors. Through the open doors of the other schoolrooms he could see rows of desks with attentive students sitting at them; he could hear, lonely in the surrounding silence, the voices of the teachers as they lectured. They were voices like those of priests praying mechanically in some chapel and the echo from the big rooms made it impossible t distinguish the meaning of the words. He went dow the stairs and stood looking out into the street, in a sudden, drenching freshness. It was raining heavily, the pavements were gurgling with water, there was a rain-streaked whiteness in the air; and through that whiteness and those streaks of rain there quivered the intense brilliance of a flash of lightning. He heard thunder in the distance, then nearer, a rumbling uproar like a landslide of loose rocks, ending in a sharp burst which seemed to be the signal for a renewed downpour of rain. Then he stepped out from the doorway and started walking bareheaded through the deluge.

The rain seemed to have transformed the whole town into water. The houses were made of upright, gray water, the pavements of yellowish, gurgling water, the dim, shadowy forms of passers-by running to take shelter under doorways seemed also to be made of water, as were the lamp-posts that undulated like thin, black snakes and the greenish masses of the streetcars that swelled out as they approached from the far end of the street. The rain poured down in one direction and then, as the wind changed, in another—methodically, it might have been said. Luca felt the water running from his hair down the back of his neck, and inside his shirt, down his back. The books under his arm were soaked. He stepped in a puddle up to his ankle. After that he had, at every step, the disagreeable feeling of his foot squeezing out water inside the swollen, slippery confinement of his shoe. And so, walking slowly in water and through water, he reached home.

Once in his own room, he threw himself on the bed and started trembling all over. The trembling shook his body uncontrollably, from head to foot; inside his mouth his teeth made a loud, rattling noise, as though he had two rows of dice in his head. His whole body was aching; and at moments an intense heat, which seemed as if it were lined with ice, ran through him and took possession of his face.

He heard the door open but did not move; he was lying flat on his back, his head at the bottom of the bed and his feet on the pillow. "What are you doing? Whatever's the matter? Why aren't you at school?" he heard his mother asking. "I think I'm sick," he answered unwillingly. He felt a hand on his forehead and then heard his mother exclaim: "Why, you're burning hot . . . . You must get into bed at once." At that moment the bells of the church near by began to strike midday.

LUCA'S illness lasted for almost three months. During the first month, although he had a very high temperature all the time, he remained perfectly lucid, even though—as he sometimes seemed to realize—this lucidity, for the very reason that it concerned itself with a condition that was unhealthy and feverish, was of an abnormal intensity and not infrequently deviated into violent excitement and wild talk. He no longer wished to die; he was certain that he *would* die and that certainty satisfied him. Convinced that death was imminent, all he had to do was to watch its progress and take a secret pleasure in it. He no longer hated himself, as at the time when he had despaired of his own ability to pursue the policy of revolt to its utmost conclusion; instead, he had a feeling of victorious contempt for these forces in himself which still resisted and still wished to bind him to life. They were the forces which had made him love his studies, his parents, the governess; and which now, deprived of their former props, clutched, before they sank, finally, in death's black flood, at the last straws—the broth which the servant made him swallow, spoonful by spoonful, the ray of winter sunshine that reached him where he lay, his mother's distressed eyes, his father's perturbed, anxious expression. He wished to die and he was sure that he was going to die; but when his mother said to him, in an unhappy but encouraging voice: "Come along, eat a little more . . . it'll help you to get well," those despicable forces prevented him from answering as he would have wished: "But I don't want to get well; I want to die"; and they compelled him, in spite of himself, to smile and to open his mouth. Then he would console himself with the thought, that, after all, these were concessions to other people's lives, not to his own, which by now had cast anchor and departed once and for all from those wretched shores beside which it had dallied for so long.

Under these conditions, the duplicity which had entered into his life from the day when death had appeared to him as the only solution to the problem of his relations with the world—that duplicity now became intensified till it attained the kind of shrill coherence of a comedy of errors. With his parents he played, in a docile manner, the now entirely detached role of the invalid who is going to get well, of the scholar who is going to return to his studies, of the boy who is going to grow up and become a man; but, the moment he was alone, he became merely the dying man, fully conscious and contented, who watches for the approach of his end with a mind filled with hope. He enjoyed taking his own temperature early in the morning, and seeing the shining column inside the thermometer leap rapidly up to the highest degrees; he enjoyed, during the long afternoons, the feeling that his sickness was getting the better of his consciousness, as he lay in a feverish torpor; he enjoyed, during the night, the idea that one of those brief snatches of sleep, full of sweat and fever, to which now and then he abandoned himself, might, without his knowing it, transform itself into death. His longing for death had by this time acquired a peculiar intensity and concreteness; it almost seemed that he longed for death with the sensuality with which, once upon a time, he had longed for the embraces of the governess. To die, it sometimes occurred to him, was perhaps the one true pleasure that life reserved for mankind.

Sometimes his mother would make plans for his future. "After you leave school," she said one day, "you must take your degree . . . If you go in for law, you can work with your father and inherit his clientele and his chambers . . . And then, when the right moment comes, you must marry a girl of good family . . . But before you get married it would be a good thing for you to travel a bit so as to see something of the world. Your father and I agree about this . . . You must go to France and England; in that way you'll familiarize yourself with the languages, too, by speaking them on the spot . . ."

"But it costs a lot of money to travel like that," said Luca, pretending to take these programs of his mother's seriously.

"Well, we'll give it to you," answered his mother proudly; "we're comfortably off . . . You shall never lack money, provided it's for useful purposes."

"But I shall not merely *not* take a degree, *not* travel, *not* get married," Luca would have liked to shout; "I shall not even, ever again, put my feet on the ground." However, though his mother's obtuseness and assurance aroused in him an access of fury, so that he was conscious of his heart beating twice as fast and his teeth grinding together in spite of himself, he succeeded in controlling himself and answered, in a voice of childish covetousness: "But I should like to go to Germany too."

Certain details of everyday life which had once appeared to concern him closely and to be, in themselves, commendable, now seemed to him to have been thrust away into a remote distance—for example, the newspaper which his father came and read in his room directly after meals. As he looked at his father's figure outlined against the background of the window, and at the newspaper which he held open in his hands, he was filled with disgust for the world in which that newspaper was published, bought and read. This was not so much on account of the futility (which, by now, he discounted) of the things that the newspaper contained, as of the absurdity of the object itself and of its use—that sheet of light, stretched material, covered with black marks, over which his father silently ran his eyes. That was the world in which an infinite number of such things, both unjustified and unjustifiable, were accomplished, the world in which everything went on without any purpose, automatically, through force of inertia; and it was pleasant to think that he would soon be leaving that world. Only once did he allow his thought to be seen—and for one moment it became single instead of double—when his mother, thinking to amuse him, started looking for his stamp collection. He allowed her to rummage about for a little, to no purpose, and then said: "It's not there any more. I gave it away."

"What? You gave it away?" his mother could not help exclaiming, in a sudden, indignant outburst. Then she seemed to recollect that Luca was ill and added, in a gentler voice: "But why did you give it away? Whatever came into your head?"

"I gave it away because I knew I was going to die," Luca answered, in a barely audible voice.

It was only partly true; actually he had got rid of his stamp collection not because he knew he was going to die, but because he wanted to die. But his mother was alarmed and, after a quick, brief glance at him, said, with almost her old hardness: "Now don't talk nonsense . . . What d'you mean, you're going to die? You're going to get well."

Luca seemed to recognize in those words the whole of the tyranny against which he had struggled for so long; and, when his mother had gone out of the room, he said aloud, in a tone of defiance: "Who says I'm going to get well? I'm going to die and I *shall* die."

During the whole time, however—as, indeed, before he fell ill—the longing for death never appeared to him in the guise of a suicidal impulse. If someone had spoken to him of suicide he would certainly have been surprised, since not even the word, still less the deed, had ever entered his mind. Even in the languor of illness, his longing for death appeared to him in much the same way as it had appeared whenever he had thought about it with clarity and determination—as a necessary sacrifice, the inevitable conclusion of a series of other, minor, sacrifices. This sacrifice struck him as a bitter one; but its bitterness was not of the kind that is inspired by an unjust fate, rather it was the bitterness felt by someone who is aware of his own weakness and loneliness in face of an overwhelming task and who knows that he can perform that task only at a high cost to himself—an unutterable bitterness, mingled with an indescribable joy, as though he knew that he was attaining in death an aim that he had pursued all his life. What that aim was, he could not have said; but he knew for certain it was an act of love, if only because it compelled him to hate so fiercely.

One night he thought he was really dying, or, to be more exact, that he understood the real meaning of his own longing for death. He was asleep; then suddenly he woke up with a painful shock, feeling his whole body—light, now, in its thinness—start violently up, just as a withered shrub starts up out of the ground when pulled by the hand that comes to uproot it. He looked around and then, by the light of the nightlamp on the little table by his bed he discerned a new and painful intensity in the general look of the room. It was as though a dense and growing vibration had forced all the objects in the room outside their usual limits, and the air seemed rarefied and filled with flashes of light. Although they still retained their own likenesses, the furniture and the other things appeared to be fraught with meaning and to have assumed a hostile, threatening expression. They did not speak, but it was as though they were whispering among themselves in low, malevolent voices. Such an intensity—as of people who, without moving or uttering a word, allow the threatening feelings that fill them to ooze out unmistakably—had the effect of shifting reality to a painful remoteness, and for the first time suggested to him the idea of death as a magical operation allowing him to create a world less absurd, more lovable, more intimate, in which all things would be justified by love. He understood that he owed it, not so much to himself as to the reality outside himself, to die, in order to give that reality a harmony and bring it to life. That cupboard, that chest of drawers, that bookshelf, the whole of this room—and in the same way his parents, his school, his teachers and his schoolfellows, he himself lying there in bed—all these were something that he had experienced in a dream during all the years of his life, as one experiences an obscure and horrible nightmare into which, whatever efforts one may make, one cannot succeed in introducing any order or sense. At his birth he had not, in reality, begun to live, but rather to dream fearful and absurd dreams. Yes, it was essential for him to die, he thought, to take advantage of the nightmare's greatest intensity to cry out once and then awake.

He remembered having experienced the same sensation of nightmare on that far-off night when, standing in the doorway of his parents' bedroom, he had seen them in their night clothes, their arms full of money, taking down the picture of the Virgin from the wall and uncovering the steel safe. And he understood that it was for them he wanted to die, and for the world of which they formed part, so as to free himself from that feeling of hatred and absurdity with which they inspired him and which prevented him from loving them as he would have liked. He felt that the act of dying really depended only on himself and was a thing very easily undertaken, now that he knew he was dying not for himself but for others; and a faint, contented smile came to his lips. As he lay beneath his pile of well tucked-in blankets, he could feel the high fever wrapping his limbs in a burning veil of sweat. With the sensation of yielding himself up to death he closed his eyes and fell asleep, the smile still on his lips.

BUT instead of death came delirium. An assembly of corpulent animals with long snouts sat gravely round his bed, like so many doctors at the bedside of a dying man. They swayed their heads backward and forward, then, like dogs around a bone, threw themselves down on their knees around the bed, stretching out their snouts on top of the bedding. Luca was terrified by these snouts, which were long and flexible, gray and dry and cracked, with occasional bristles here and there standing straight up like pins. At the end of each bristle there was a kind of sucker with quivering eyelashes all round it, and, in the middle of the eyelashes, an eye, sparkling like a diamond, staring at him. The largest and most important of these great animals was at the foot of the bed and stretched out its snout between his legs. Twisting and undulating, the snout grew longer and longer and reached up toward his stomach; and he, weeping and shouting, seized it with both hands and tried to turn it aside. But the snout, though flexible, was hard, and increased in size as he held it in his hands, and reached up toward his face. In the meantime there appeared, on the wall near the door, a number of green excrescences shaped like crooked fingers, which multiplied rapidly and finally formed a cascade of those plants known as "witches' claws," which have upturned, clawlike tendrils. The plant hung down in the place where the coatstand usually was; it looked as if it had grown out of a wide, black crack, in the shape of an ear, which had opened in the wall. Now a wide-brimmed black hat flew about in the air and hung itself up on one of the clawlike excrescences of the plant. Other hats followed it through the pallid air, as though thrown by a skillful hand—men's hats, large and dark and round, women's hats, small, sparkling with sequins, adorned with feathers of different colors, hats of strange fashions such as had never been seen. All these hats fell on the plant, covering it, hiding it completely. And then the whole hat-laden plant detached itself from the crack in the wall and, like an enormous lizard covered with armor from head to tail, started moving about rapidly, here and there, running up and down the wall.

It looked as if it were trying to get down on to the floor in order to hurl itself against Luca's bed, but luckily the room was half full of black, motionless water, and every time the creature reached this water it drew back with obvious disgust, and ran up to the ceiling again. Long black snakes, thin and graceful, were emerging from the water, swaying their flattened heads this way and that; while a great purple bird flew heavily above them, starting from one corner of the ceiling, swooping down to the surface of the water and then rising again toward the opposite corner. Several times the bird skimmed over the bed, and Luca could see its head, with a round white eye which looked as though it were made of glass and a massive curved beak. The bird dived down, seized one of the snakes in the point of its beak and pulled it out of the water, then flew upward again. The snake twisted and turned in the air like a fluttering ribbon as the bird pulled it back and forth over the room. But from the crack in which the coatstand-plant had grown there now opened a deep cleft which zigzagged upward across the wall and continued across the ceiling. Inside this cleft there soon appeared an intensely thick swarm of brown, shiny insects; one of these insects dropped from the ceiling on to the bed, between Luca's legs, and then another and another, then a whole cluster of them, and then hundreds and thousands of them, until the air was darkened. The entire bed was now covered by a wriggling carpet and he was shouting for someone to take them away and pushing back the carpet of insects with both hands as it seemed to be rising up toward his stomach. At his cries, the carpet rolled itself up at the bottom of the bed and remained there, motionless, like a great swarming clyinder.

His attention was attracted by a new peril. Inside the medicine bottles that crowded the little table by his bed were enclosed a number of horrible little bald, hunchbacked dwarfs that stuck out their discolored heads or, more often, their thin arms and long, clawlike hands. Another of these little dwarfs appeared out of an egg that lay on a dish, breaking one end of the egg and poking its head out like a disgusting chicken; its thin legs stuck out at the other end and the dwarf started staggering about, wearing the eggshell like a shirt. Yet another of them was sitting astride the rubber bulb of a glass dropper, and as the bulb was pressed down, Luca could see some blackish substance running up and down inside the glass tube. At a stronger pressure, a third dwarf popped out and at once began putting out its tongue at Luca, dancing about and sniggering and holding with both hands its swollen, whitish paunch which looked like that of a fly when it is carrying eggs. More of these manikins were chasing each other among the medicine bottles, brandishing weapons which turned out to be the forks and spoons that Luca used. They did not really disgust Luca, indeed they almost amused him—except that they seemed to him dirty, and after seeing them come out of the bottles and handle the spoons and forks he thought that both medicines and food would be infected. So he pushed away the medicines and the food with signs of disgust, shouting and weeping; and found comfort in the gestures of approval which were made to him from the wall by a holy old monk with a beard. It was true that, from the wall in front of him, there projected, in contrast, the naked belly of a woman, white and swelling, taut as a drum, with big red ears at each side and a small triangular black beard in the groin beneath it; but he took no notice of it, and had eyes only for the face of the monk, so benign and reassuring. But suddenly a smile came over the old man's face, he opened his mouth, and with an unexpected grimace, stuck out his tongue. It was the governess's tongue, black and rough and moist, and at the end of it trembled the thin horns of a snail; and this snail, projecting from his mouth to an extraordinary length, waved about in the air for a little, extending its horns, then curled back upon itself and started gently stroking the monk's face, reaching up to his nose and forehead. It was a truly enormous snail and it went on and on coming out of his mouth and never stopped stroking the venerable brow framed in white hair, reaching up between the eyes which still gazed at Luca in a serene, benevolent manner. At the same time, on the other wall, the woman's belly split open at the navel and from the gash appeared a knee, as though someone shut up inside the belly was struggling to get out, without success. Then the knee disappeared and a complete naked leg protruded itself cautiously from the gash, the foot stretching down toward the floor . . .

He was continually imploring his parents to deliver him from these unbearable presences; but his parents were not there and he could hear, instead, hissing, intense voices, as of numbers of frantic theatrical prompters, whispering meaningless words hurriedly into his ear. Or there would be sudden loud bursts of tolling bells, their hollow vibrations clashing in the trembling air. A shrill whistle, dry as the sound of compressed steam escaping through a valve, never ceased to make itself heard in a distant corner of the room. And he was shouting for them to turn off the gas, otherwise they would all be asphyxiated.

But all the time, even as he lay helpless beneath the nightmares of delirium, he had the sensation that he was making some progress among his hallucinations, like a traveler among the tree trunks and shadows of a forest, toward an opening that he could not fail to find. And then one day, sitting beside him, in the act of supporting his forehead with one hand and feeding him with the other, he saw a woman whom he did not know but who, manifestly, was not one of those imaginary figures of delirium but a person of flesh and blood. Her head was wrapped, it seemed to him, in a kind of white turban, beneath which her face looked brown and somewhat wasted but well-preserved, like that of a middle-aged woman meticulously made up. This face was held erect, with a birdlike vanity, upon a long, rounded neck; and when he stammered out some confused words of thanks, the carefully made-up eyes, drowned in their paint and their wrinkles, held a spark of sympathy, while the mouth widened in a brilliant, pathetic smile, showing teeth of a doubtful whiteness, of which two were gold. It was the nurse, as he learned later, whom his parents, frightened by his delirium, had engaged to watch beside him night and day. And what he had at first sight mistaken for a turban was a nurse's cap. A white light, which he realized must be that of noonday, streamed through the window; and beside his bed a screen, usually to be found in the drawing-room, appeared to be concealing another bed. He made a movement as though to show that the light tired his eyes; and the woman at once rose and went to the window. She was all in white and Luca saw that that small, well-preserved head of hers, like the head of some Oriental bird, was set upon a massive body whose ungainly shapes were broadly displayed by the extreme neatness of her dress. She lowered the blind, plunging the room into a pleasant semidarkness, then came back and sat by the bed, putting out her hand again to support Luca's forehead while with the other she held out the spoon. Luca saw that her hands were long and brown and dry, with painted fingernails. On the little finger of one hand she wore a small ring with a red stone in it.

Then, as the fog of delirium gradually cleared away, although he was in a state of utter prostration following the fall of temperature, he noticed a strange thing which to him was entirely new. The nurse, in spite of being middle-aged and having lost her looks, the room which he had once hated, every single object, in fact, appeared to him in a new light—serene, clean, familiar, lovable, and, so to speak, appetizing. He noted with surprise that he did not so much look at things as cast his eyes greedily upon them, just as a hungry animal throws itself upon a piece of food after a long fast. There beside him, for instance, was the little table covered with phials and bottles among which he had seen those filthy little dwarfs chasing each other. Now he saw honest, simple bottles of different-colored or clear glass, with corks or metal tops, and adorned with labels upon which even the flowing, hurried handwriting of the druggists who had written the prescriptions had a reassuring and affectionate look. Those neatly arranged bottles, the powders and liquids that they contained, the writing on each bottle indicating how such powders and liquids were to be used—he felt that all these things wished him well; and he seemed to be repaying their goodwill with a corresponding feeling of sympathy. When he moved his eyes from the little table to the nurse, whose face he could see in profile behind the bottles, he was conscious of the same feeling of contentment and affection. She was middle-aged; but Luca's eyes, though they could see the wrinkles under the make-up which reddened her cheeks and darkened her eyes, could not help loving those wrinkles, desiring them, even, as details that were richly significant, in the same way that one desires a modest-looking but renowned fruit for the delicious juice it contains. He was almost impelled to put out his hand and stroke those cheeks and those eyes. The thoughts, too, that her face inspired in him, dictated as they were by this new feeling of sympathy, were affectionate and penetrating. He reflected that she must have been very beautiful when she was young and that it must be a very bitter thing for her now to be no longer beautiful; also that, judging by appearances, she must in the past have been wealthy and free and that she was working as a nurse in order to earn her living. But his feeling for her had not an erotic origin—like the feeling, mixed up with repulsion, that he had once had for the governess. In fact, the feeling he now had for the woman he had had, shortly before, for the bottles; and when he turned his eyes away from her to look around the room, he had the same feeling for the various pieces of furniture—no longer haunting and fantastically absurd but calm and familiar, standing quietly round like affectionate old friends. He turned his eyes to the coatstand which he had seen changed into a snail running up and down the walls, and saw now that it was just an ordinary coatstand with three arms; and he was pleased to see that a petticoat and a chemise belonging to the nurse were hanging on it, and was also pleased to notice that they were unpretentious garments, like those of a poor person. Everything, in fact, to these new eyes of his, seemed to have significance—a very humble and homely significance, it is true, but a positive one. To the benevolence that colored all reality with fellow feeling there was added, besides, the sense of an established order, modest but necessary, in which nothing now appeared absurd and devoid of usefulness. Those bottles were just bottles, that coatstand was just a coatstand; nor was there any danger now of seeing the dwarf's heads sticking out of the former, or of seeing the latter run up the wall.

But his surprise reached its height when the nurse, having fed him, started to wash his face. She took away the tray with the plates and spoons and carried it over to the table by the window; then she spread a bath towel across the bed, disappeared and came back in a moment with an aluminum bowl full of warm water, a piece of soap and a comb. She placed the bowl on the bed, sat down beside it and dipped the soap in the water. As she lightly soaped his face and very gently wiped the soap off again with a little sponge full of delicious warm water, he seemed already to be conscious of a kind of grace and delicacy in his own cheeks. But when, after that, she handed him the mirror and asked him to hold it up while she parted his hair, and he saw his own white, thin face, the feeling that the sight of it inspired in him astonished him profoundly. His face, refined by illness, seemed to have emerged purified from fever and delirium, as a landscape long buffeted and ravaged emerges from the mists of a violent storm. He was conscious of a feeling of love for that adolescent face which looked back at him, dreamy eyed. It was true that this was the same love that he felt for the nurse and for all the other things; but when he remembered the hatred that he had once felt for himself he saw that it was the most important feature of this new change.

The nurse finished combing his hair—in a way in which he himself never used to do it, that is, with the parting at one side. But Luca had no desire to protest. This, too, was a new and pleasing thing, and he felt almost grateful to her for her mistake. She removed the towel from the bed, took the bowl and went out. In a moment she was back, and she sat down in what was apparently her usual place, behind the little bed table, with a book in her hand. The whole room seemed to concentrate itself round this quiet, familiar movement of hers as if by enchantment, so that it, too, became quiet and familiar. Luca lay silent for some time, and then said: "I should like to sit up in bed, with a pillow or two behind my back."

"Well, you must be careful not to catch cold," she answered. She went out and came back with two pillows. She bent over Luca and, putting her arm round his waist, helped him to pull himself up and fitted in the pillows behind him. This effort was enough to make Luca feel the blood leave his face and his sight darken, as though he were about to faint. She helped him to put on a sweater and sat down again. After a moment Luca asked: "I've been very sick, haven't I?"

Resting her book on her knees and looking at him, the nurse answered: "Yes, very."

"I wanted to die," said Luca, with sincerity.

The nurse got up and passed her hand over his hair, gazing at him in an affectionate manner. Then she said: "But you'll get well now."

Luca looked up at her and did not say anything. A sudden emotion brought tears to his eyes. The nurse went on: "You'll get well if you're obedient and do all the things you ought to do." Without saying a word Luca took her hand and began kissing it gently, reflectively. Meanwhile the tears gushed from his wide open eyes.

ONE evening toward the end of his convalescence Luca, tired of reading, was dozing with his head lying back on the pillow, when the nurse, with the solemn air of one who announces a piece of good news, appeared in the doorway and said: "Now you must get ready . . . the water's running, and in a moment you're going to have your first bath."

"A bath . . . won't it make me feel giddy?" asked Luca.

"Don't worry, I'll be there to help you," she answered. She began preparations, coming and going about the room, precise and busy in her movements—movements which were those of a trained nurse and contrasted strongly with her appearance of a decayed gentlewoman. It looked to Luca as though she were joyful at this new step of his along the road to health; and he was grateful to her because, as he knew, he was to her only one sick person among many and she had no reason to be happy at his recovery; rather—since her salary came to an end with the end of his illness—she had reason to be sorry for it. She went out and came back in a short time with a big bath towel which she spread out to warm on the radiator. Then she went to the wardrobe and took out a camel's-hair dressing gown his mother had recently bought for the time when Luca would be getting up. She arranged the bathrobe on the armchair at the foot of the bed and placed a new pair of slippers on the floor. "A nice hot bath," she said as she turned the slippers with their heels toward the bed; "You'll see how well you feel after it." She pronounced these words in an inviting tone, but almost as if speaking to herself, with an abstraction which made them seem all the more natural and affectionate—as though they came truly from her heart and were not said merely to please Luca. Then she went out again, leaving the door open. The bathroom was on the other side of the passage, at no great distance, and the gay, rushing sound of the water could be distinctly heard. The nurse dallied for some time, waiting, perhaps, for the bath to fill; then she rushed in breathlessly, took the dressing gown and held it out, open, to Luca, saying: "Come on, quick . . . the bath's ready . . . up you get."

Formerly Luca would have been ashamed to show himself in pyjamas. But the game was altered, and everything which in the past would have repelled him he now accepted, not without satisfaction. The nurse pulled away the coverings and Luca sat up. All at once he felt his head going round and the blood draining away from his face. The nurse was standing in front of him, holding the bath robe open, but he could not think of standing up and remained there, in distress, sitting on the bed, his legs hanging down and his face, gone very white, bent over to one side. She understood, and threw down the dressing gown. "You feel weak . . . of course . . . wait a moment, I'll help you." She placed a robust arm around his waist and helped him to his feet. For a moment Luca had the sensation that his feet were not resting on the floor. The weakness showed itself in a kind of hiatus which had the shape of his legs without having either their substance or their strength. "Now put on the dressing gown . . . come along," he heard the nurse saying. Obediently he turned, allowing her to insert first one of his arms and then the other into the wide sleeves, and then stood still, while she swiftly closed the dressing gown around him. "Now walk," she said, holding him round the waist; "don't be afraid . . . I'm here."

Luca took his first steps, leaning heavily against the nurse, while she supported him around the waist. Her expression was one of carefulness and devotion; and, as if the strength he needed came to him from the sight of her face and the contact of her arm across his back, Luca felt that at every step his feet were regaining confidence and were communicating a new and pleasant sense of solidity and safety to his legs and to the whole of his body. Just as, when he had awoken from the nightmares of delirium and had imagined, looking at the furniture in his room, that he had a positive appetite for it, so now he felt that he was hungry for the floor upon which he was walking, and that he was receiving more and more nourishment from it with each step that he took. "Perhaps I'm not as weak as I thought," he said, reinvigorated. The nurse nodded her assent as she continued to support him. Closely enlaced, they left the room; the house seemed deserted, as Luca guessed from the darkness and silence in the passage. They went into the bathroom, and the nurse, having made Luca sit down on a stool, closed the door. It was hot as an oven in the bathroom. The bath was full of bluish water that looked as if it were boiling, and the nurse turned off the taps and placed a new piece of soap in the dish. A little embarrassed, Luca slipped off his dressing gown, which she took and hung up on a hook near the door. Left with nothing on but his pyjamas, Luca thought for a moment of asking the nurse to leave the room. But she did not appear to attach any importance to his embarrassment, nor even to have noticed it; and Luca decided that he would do exactly what she told him to do. "Now take off your pyjamas," she said, "and get into the bath . . . then I'll soap you."

Obediently Luca rose to his feet and slipped off his pyjama jacket. Then the nurse bent down and lightly untied his trousers and pulled them down to his feet, raising herself again at once, a little flushed in the face; but Luca thought that this was because of the effort of stooping. Naked, he stood there hesitating, but felt the nurse put her arm round his waist again and guide him gently toward the bath. Slowly he got into the scalding water, first with one foot, then with the other, and finally, very gradually, he lay down. "How d'you feel?" asked the nurse, sitting down on a stool and looking fixedly at him. "Very weak," replied Luca. And this was true. In the hot water there came back to him an indescribable feeling of emptiness at the back of the neck, accompanied by a slight nausea. The nurse said: "You must stand up, and I'll soap you well . . . You can rinse yourself, and then you must come out of the water at once. It's very weakening if you stay in long." Luca looked at her and then looked at himself in the bath: indistinct, gently undulating, tinged with a faint bluish light, his own body inspired in him, as his face had done the first time he had seen it in the mirror, a feeling of affection. And the sight of his pubic region, where the brown hairs, dusted over with bright little air bubbles, seemed to fluctuate hither and thither round his sexual organ like seaweed round an anemone in the depths of a clear sea-water pool, did not appear to him in any way indecent but in perfect harmony with the rest of his body, which was chaste, thin and white. "Well, are you going to stand up?" asked the nurse. He gave a start, raised his eyes and realized that she too, from her stool, had, like him, been looking at his body lying in the bottom of the bath. "All right," he said; and rose to his feet.

The water came halfway up his legs. A mirror on the wall in front of him showed him himself, quite naked, and the nurse, red in the face, bending down toward him as she soaped his body. She soaped first his back, then his chest and finally his belly. Luca realized then that, whereas the working of his mind was still languid and slow, his sensibility, refined, perhaps, by illness, caused him to notice many things which at another time would have escaped him. There was, for example, an excess of zeal and professional skillfulness in the alacrity of the nurse which in some way excited him, though his weakened mind was quite unable to define it. The nurse, her hands white with soap, straightened herself up and said: "Now sit down again." Obediently Luca let himself slip down again into the water.

She went out and after a moment came back again, holding the towel with outstretched arms and crying: "Quick—quick, while it's hot." Luca stood up, hesitated a moment with his foot on the edge of the bath, then climbed out. At once the nurse was upon him, wrapping him up tightly, with a sort of affection, in the burning towel: "Isn't it nice and warm?" Luca, all muffled up, could not but be conscious of a glow of well-being—the first for a very long time. "Now you must dry yourself—quickly," she said. Luca sat down on the stool, and the nurse, on her knees, vigorously rubbed his legs. She put so much energy into it that her face was soon scarlet, and in her kneeling attitude there was a quality of vague but passionate adoration that embarrassed Luca. Then, as her hands moved upward over his legs, she lightly touched his groin, and Luca, instinctively quivering, suddenly realized what till that moment he had merely—and almost in spite of himself—suspected: that chance had willed that he and the nurse should find themselves alone in the flat that evening; and that there was going to be a repetition of what had happened between himself and the governess, months before. But with this difference, that his whole spirit was changed and would now accept what at that time he had thought it his duty to refuse.

After that first light, perhaps involuntary, touch, the nurse appeared to lose all her energy; and Luca felt that her hands had become hesitant, as though, instead of massaging him, they wished—and yet at the same time did not wish—to caress him. Her hands moved over his body, but seemed anxious at any cost to avoid his groin; and yet it was straight toward his groin that they would slide, every now and then, from the most distant places, in a swift incursion that was rendered rough and clumsy by haste and remorse. These incursions had a particular character of their own; they were like the pecking of a bird or the bite of an animal, at once furtive and eager. In other respects too, the nurse—flushed in the face, her head bent so that her eyes were concealed—now showed plainly the nature of the feeling that was agitating her. Luca looked at her, and it seemed to him that her flush deepened more and more as the circling strokes of the massage closed in more narrowly about his belly. The whole of that big body of hers, bent forward from the knees, seemed to be straining with the desire, at once encouraged and opposed, to escape from the limits of mere massage into a kind of contact that was freer and of a different nature. But, in contrast to what had once happened with the governess, he did not feel any desire to draw back, any repugnance. He felt himself to be no more than an object in her hands, entirely without any will of his own apart from the wish to be docile and obedient. These reflections almost made him forget the woman and her passion. Finally, after one more positive, more satisfied touch, she rose to her feet, saying: "There, now you can get dressed."

Luca got up and the towel fell to the floor. The massage had produced in him a visible erection; but he noticed with surprise that he felt no shame. This, too, was something new; and it seemed another sign of his new confidence in himself and in the world. Once it would have been impossible for him to accept a physical excitement of this kind simply, without disgust, as without vanity. He would have resented it in every case as a revolt, and his first impulse would have been to oppose and destroy it. But now these manifestations of instinct—whether it was a question of himself or of the nurse, of his desire or hers, and even when they occurred in a manner unforeseen and entirely beyond his control—all these manifestations, it seemed to him, should be welcomed, as so many aspects of a completely lovable, completely understandable reality. There he stood, naked, in front of this woman, with the signs of the excitement of his senses visible in his own body; yet, in spite of it, he felt no desire to be elsewhere or to be other than what he was. Lost in astonishment, he started violently at the nurse's voice saying again: "Well, are you going to get dressed?"

In silence he allowed her to slip on his pyjamas and wrap him again in the dressing gown. As she opened the door she asked him: "How do you feel?"

"Fine."

They left the bathroom and started along the carpeted floor of the passage. The nurse was supporting him, and had now reassumed her usual attitude toward him, professional but solicitous. But in the passage Luca was assailed again by a feeling of extreme weakness; his sight was dimmed; a great coldness chilled his forehead and his temples; and, with a murmur of: "I'm feeling ill," he abandoned himself to the nurse's supporting arm. He realized he must be coming out of a faint when he found he was sitting on his bed with the nurse applying a damp cloth to his forehead. "It's nothing," she said, "it's the bath that has weakened you." Luca did not answer, and the nurse, having removed his dressing gown, turned back the bed clothes and, hoisting up his legs, helped him into bed. He noticed the freshness of the clean sheets as a pleasure which he owed to her. "Now you must try and rest," he heard her say. The door closed and he was left alone.

DURING the days that followed the nurse never once alluded to the incident in the bathroom. On his side, Luca did not think of reminding her of it, not so much because he would not have liked to follow up those first approaches as because he felt much more inclined to submit passively to her will, whatever it might be, rather than exercise his own. It was enough for him, in any case, to understand the meaning of that experience; it mattered little if the experience itself stopped at its very beginning. But he realized that she was thinking about him and about what had happened in the bathroom, and he awaited the result of these reflections with some curiosity. If he went on to attempt, in his own mind, an exact definition of his feeling, he observed that—apart from a strong but generic attraction such as he might have felt for any other woman in similar circumstances—he continued to cherish that affectionate, comprehensive, disinterested feeling that now marked his constant attitude toward everybody and every thing. This attitude manifested itself in a polite but sincere curiosity about her character and past. She was now not so much nursing him as keeping him company; and as confidence grew she reached the point of telling him many stories about her life—which were all, or almost all, concerned with her love affairs with a large number of men, of the most diverse ages and conditions. As Luca had imagined, she had been in easy circumstances in her younger days; then her husband had died and in order to make a living she had been compelled to take various jobs, the last of which had been nursing. At first hesitating and reticent, when she saw that Luca showed no surprise she became more and more frank, and finally, in her own rather pathetic way, positively immodest. Hers had been a perfectly ordinary life, full of errors and vanities; and she, in turn, was a perfectly ordinary person with all the prejudices of those who have come down in the world—as, for example, that her job was unworthy of her. But these errors and vanities seemed to Luca, thanks to his new indulgent attitude, to be not merely excusable but lovable as well. He was pleased, above all, with her illusion that she was still young and beautiful, an illusion that once upon a time he would have found ridiculous but which was now a vigorous feature of her character. One day when they were speaking of feminine beauty, she rose to her feet and strutted about the room, pulling her dress tightly over her hips and belly and saying: "Look at me and tell me honestly how many women younger than me can boast of a figure like mine." Her eyes sparkled, she smoothed down her buttocks with both her hands, uplifted her bosom and turned her head this way and that.

Luca could not help smiling. But he was pleased when he realized that it was a sympathetic smile.

During this time his strength was returning to him, and now he could take a bath by himself. The first few times the nurse still helped him, but without any recurrence of the disturbances and excitements of the first evening. She seemed really to have given up hope of Luca, but not without a certain sort of affectionate, melancholy regret on her part, as though in the sacrifice of desire she had found a new, albeit sad, love-motif. Luca came to understand this one day when, lying with his eyes half-closed and pretending to be asleep, he had seen her gazing at him for a long time, with a singular expression on her face which he had not at once been able to define. It was a look of perplexity and almost of scorn. It was as though instead of searching in her own consciousness she had been seeking, in his face, the reasons for her own sacrifice; and as though, not finding them there, she had become angry with herself for not having the courage to throw scruples aside and take her pleasure of him as she longed to do.

One evening, having brought him his supper tray, she sat down on the bed and said: "I think this is the last day I shall be staying with you."

Luca raised his eyes from his plate and with a candor not entirely devoid of malice said: "I'm sorry . . . and when are you going?"

"Tomorrow evening," she answered. And then she added, looking straight at him: "I'm sorry too."

Luca looked at her. She was sitting on the bed in an uncomfortable position, her bust and her face twisted round toward him and one hand pressing heavily on the coverlet for support. He noticed, beneath the redness of the rouge on her cheeks, the flush of another, warmer redness, a redness of a stirring and excitement of the blood. As on that day in the bathroom, her eyes, like sparkling stones in old, dull settings, shone through their make-up, pathetically. She added: "I had got quite accustomed to you."

Luca said nothing. She went on, lowering her voice: "Perhaps I was a little in love with you too."

Luca had expected anything rather than this declaration of love. The only amorous experience of his life had been that of his brief relationship with the governess. And he had imagined that, like her, the nurse would herself take the initiative without any words, imposing her own desire upon his passivity. Taken unawares by the sentimental character of a passion that he had hitherto imagined to be imperative and sensual, he was lost for a moment in a cold, surprised embarrassment. He said, in a colorless voice: "Really?"

"Yes," replied the nurse, "but it doesn't matter." She shook her head and lowered her eyes, with a movement of her mouth as if repressing a sob. Then Luca said, with sincerity: "I think I was rather fond of you too . . . but it depended on you . . ."

He left his sentence unfinshed and looked at her. It was the truth, he thought, nothing but the truth. But from whence came this self-assurance, not devoid of malice, this self-assurance like that of an accomplished seducer? He was pleased with it, as a new endowment, both as an aid to action and to entering into relations with other people. She raised sparkling eyes toward him and asked: "And so, if I had wanted to . . . ?" Luca nodded. He was thinking now that she would leap upon him, rather as she had done in the bathroom, but with a more open violence and without any hypocrisy; and he was wondering how he ought to behave. At that moment his parents were at table and would not come for at least half an hour. Would that time—so short—be long enough? And might not his mother, for some reason or other, come in before the time? He was conscious that despite these doubts and fears he was not afraid of love nor of its consequences; and he merely added, judiciously: "I thought you wanted to, that day in the bathroom . . . there was no one in the house and it would have been easy . . ."

Contrary to what he had expected, the nurse did not throw herself upon him but rose to her feet and, looking at him from a little way off put out her arm and slowly stroked his face. Then she said: "You were too weak that day . . . besides, you're just a boy . . ."

Luca reflected that this, too, was an undeniable truth and said nothing, merely lowering his eyes. The nurse took his chin in her hand—just as you do with children when you ask them what they want—and said: "So, if I came tonight . . . would you like me to come?"

Raising his eyes toward her, Luca answered, quite simply: "I would certainly like you to come." Erect and motionless, she brooded over him with her brilliant eyes, so young, so different from the old, dead, painted eyelids between which they shone. Then, in a voice full of promise, generous, maternal, she announced: "Well then . . . if you'd really like me to . . . I'll come."

Luca nodded, as if to say that it was a good plan. The nurse went on: "I'll come . . . but we must be careful . . . we mustn't make any noise." For some time she had no longer been sleeping in Luca's room behind the screen; and Luca reflected that she was giving this piece of advice to herself rather than to him. "In a couple of hours, then," she concluded. She looked at him a moment longer, as if to observe the effect of her promise upon him; then took the tray and went out.

Left alone, Luca took up a novel from the little table by the bed and began reading. He soon realized that he was not following the meaning of the words. He felt his cheeks burning fiercely, as though the woman's glances, so laden with desire, had scorched him where they had touched him, from brow to neck. This burning sensation was pleasant and exciting and gave him a feeling of urgent vitality such as he had never known. In order to distract his mind from it, and from the excitement that accompanied it, he began thinking over what had happened. He examined his attitude toward this woman and told himself that it could not have been more honest nor more sincere. She had told him she loved him; but he had limited his reply to saying that he would be pleased if she came; and this was the exact truth. He thought that he would derive pleasure from her coming as he derived pleasure, ever since he had awoken from his delirium, from everything that happened, from every presence, every relationship; and he was glad that he did not experience, toward the nurse, any feeling that was more intense than or different from the feeling inspired in him by other people and by all inanimate things. He was, in reality, hungry for this woman, and this hunger made her desirable to him; but the same way he was hungry for the peaceful light shed by the lamp at his bedside, for the pieces of furniture standing in the shadows, for the night, for the silence that he imagined outside the house, and even for the tiny creaking of the worm that bored its tunnel in the wood of the table. These things, and many others besides, because of this hunger that made them appetizing to him, were all equally lovable and together composed a world which was new to him and at last, acceptable.

As these thoughts passed through his mind he began to feel sleepy. While he was in this drowsy state his father and mother came in, as they always did, and after the customary recommendations and questions, which he answered vaguely, kissed him and went away. It seemed to him also that the nurse was busy round his bed, tucking in those same blankets which in two hours' time she would be throwing aside so as to lie down beside him; but he was not quite certain that this was not a kind of hallucination. For he was really very sleepy; and as soon as his parents left him, he dropped into unconsciousness.

He slept for some time, with a good, solid sleep that was an expression of that same hunger which, while he was awake, gave him an appetite for everything and everybody. And he had a curious dream—suggested, perhaps, by this hunger—in which he thought he was a tree. Shaped like a tree—black, leafless, rain-soaked, numb with cold—he was standing on the top of a bare, frostbound hill, stretching out his arms which were branches and his open fingers which were twigs. An immense landscape extended all round, with hills and woods and rivers and fields, and the whole of this landscape was streaked with snow and darkened by winter mists. The sky, heavy with black, unmoving clouds, was mirrored in the flooded fields, and over all there was a profound silence, as of a dead, timeless world. But far away the sun was rising on the horizon. At first it was only a cold, red globe; then, as it rose gradually into the sky, putting the clouds to flight, it became more and more clear and radiant, and he could feel its heat even through the ice-cold bark. Beneath the rays of the sun a vast movement took place over the whole landscape, as though the woods, and every single tree in them, had shaken off their winter stillness, as though the rivers were swollen with flood-water, the fields fermenting with life, the hills softened and filled with nourishment, like a woman's breasts. All of a sudden a harsh sound—exultant, prolonged, amorous, like the call of a hunting horn—filled the air, breaking that cold silence. And to him it seemed that, starting from his roots deep-sunk in the earth, a wave of joyous hunger spread upward through his trunk; and this, overflowing the casing of bark, burst out through his branches in a thousand green and shining buds. These buds, in their turn, swiftly opened, became leaves, tendrils, boughs. And he felt himself growing, multiplying, pullulating endlessly, in an irresistible, fabulous rush of abundance, in every direction and from every part. All at once he was no longer a tree, but a man, standing upright with his arms raised toward the sun. And, with this sensation of rush and thrusting in his limbs, he awoke. The room was plunged in shadow, except for a small circle of light round the little red-shaded lamp on the bed table. The clock pointed to a quarter past midnight. In a few minutes the nurse would be coming.

Then, as he looked round the darkened room and thought about the nurse, it seemed to him that this hunger of his, in an impulse of impatience and voracity, was passing, at one step, beyond the limits of the present time and of the place where he now was, and was rushing forward into the future, both in time and in space. There, in the darkness, he seemed to see, rising to the surface, the life that remained for him to live—the places, the human faces, the movements, the meetings. He had an overwhelming sensation of aggressive freedom, of unlimited exploration, of lightning flashes of vision; as though the future, catching alight and burning in the fire of imagination, had been consumed and discounted in an instant, complete even in its smallest details. He saw that this was his life; and that now it only remained to him to be patient and live it out to the end. His eyes filled with tears; and an uncontrollable agitation ran through him. He started to cry aloud meaningless words, turning over and over in the bed and looking intently into the darkness, as though he longed to illuminate it and see the curtain of the future torn asunder. While he was at the height of this exaltation, he heard the door open.

It was the nurse. Below the fur-trimmed coat which she had thrown hurriedly over her shoulders appeared the crumpled edge of a long muslin nightgown. Luca saw her make a sign of silence with her finger on her lips. Her eyes were shining more brightly than ever, seeming to light up her whole face despite the darkness of the room. She closed the door cautiously and very slowly turned the key in the lock; then took a table napkin from the bed table and wrapped it round the lamp. She did all this without hurrying, like someone doing a thing he has done a thousand times in his life already; and Luca, lying back on his pillows, his arms spread out on the bed in front of him, watched her without excitement or embarrassment, with a curiosity that he felt to be innocent, as though she were not getting the place ready for a love scene but performing the preordained gestures of some unknown rite of her own. Having finished her preparations, she came over to the bed and, standing majestically erect, looking straight into his eyes with her own sparkling ones, she raised both her hands, took the coat from her shoulders and placed it on a chair. In this gesture she bent sideways, revealing the massive but unshapely character of her body—her hips not rounded but almost square, with broad surfaces of flesh pressing against the stuff of the nightgown; her back broad and thick; her arms gone flabby. She stood still for a moment, as if to allow Luca to admire her at leisure; then, with a vigorous, impatient gesture, she raised her arms and began slipping the nightgown over her head. Higher and higher the muslin rose, like the curtain of a theatre, but hesitant and awkward, jerkily disclosing the spectacle beneath it—her legs big but straight, like towers of brown, pink-flushed flesh; the hollow of her lap, the only retired, shadowy place among so much displayed profusion; her belly, overflowing vessel of desire; and finally her bosom, narrow between the two broad hollows below her raised arms, like a dark and hilly tract of ground between two white, deserted roads. With a final pull, at once slow and full of imperious resolution, she freed herself completely from her nightdress, throwing it to the floor, and stood facing Luca naked, with her customary air of munificence, of promise, of magnanimity. She behaved, thought Luca, as though she had been still young and beautiful and as though he looked upon her as such; and this pleased him because it seemed to him a lovable, generous illusion. When she considered that Luca had looked at her long enough, she turned back the bedclothes and slipped majestically into bed, lying down at his side. It was not so much an embrace he experienced as a sinking of the whole of himself in a limitless expanse of flesh. And when she passed her hand unhurriedly over his body, seeking his sex, and, having found it, took hold of it by the root as though she wished to tear it away, implanting it then in her own body, he had the precise feeling that she was taking him by the hand and introducing him, a reverent novice, into a mysterious cave dedicated to a religious rite. This, he thought, was the life he had formerly invoked, and little did it matter if it presented itself to him in the garb of autumn. Filled with gratitude, he found himself kissing the thin brown face with the closed eyes, motionless as an effigy. But was it the face of the nurse, or that of some deity risen up from the earth for his possession? Certainly between his hands and those limbs that lay beneath his own there passed a tremor of veneration. Meanwhile the sense of relief continued, and, with its freshness and buoyancy, redeemed the ardor and the gravity of the embrace.

THE nurse went away next day, as she had announced; and Luca was left with a feeling neither of regret nor of disgust, but rather of gratitude for his final initiation not merely into physical love but also into that more general love for all things, the first glimmer of which had reached him when he awoke from his delirium. He felt he had at last found a new and quite personal way of looking at reality—a way that was composed of sympathy and of patient expectation. This way of looking at things, he observed, permitted a rhythm of thought much calmer, much fuller, much more serene than before, and with it a vision that was no longer direct and aggressive but scrupulously, ineffably hesitant and cautious. Now, he thought, he would see things first with those new eyes which had opened that night inside him, and only afterward with the eyes which at his birth had been dazzled by the first light of day. Second and truer mother, the nurse had given him a second birth when, in his desire for death, he had been already dead. But he knew that this second birth could never have taken place if he had not first desired, so sincerely, so wholeheartedly, to die.

In the meantime there was more and more talk in the house of his departure for the mountains. Luca's parents had engaged a room for him in a sanatorium for convalescents and it only remained to fix the date of his journey. There was no mention of lessons now, except in reference to a distant day when Luca would be strong enough to face them again without harm to himself. While these preparations were going on, Luca, sitting wrapped in blankets in an armchair near the window, continued, half-asleep, to contemplate the sky which, as spring came on, grew steadily clearer and warmer. He enjoyed his own passive state now, ever since he had recognized, in things and in people, an order which was still unknown but capable of lifting him up and carrying him far away. Content to have become a part of this order, he found a new strength in accepting its mysterious, external nature.

At last the day of departure arrived. It was the end of March, and although the air was warm Luca's mother, who was going to accompany him to the sanatorium, muffled him up in several sweaters and a heavy overcoat. Luca, enveloped in this overcoat, remained quite inert, lying back in the armchair in the room which now seemed strange and filled with the light of departure—just as if he had been a suitcase or some other inanimate object. His passive state continued, persisted even at the moment when he ought to have at least taken a share in the arrangements made for him by others, rendered him inert just when inertia seemed impossible. He could hear his parents and the maids bustling about as they carried down the luggage; and he himself remained there motionless, just as though he were not going away. He felt very warm—perhaps too warm, and yet it was pleasant, also—and, without thinking of anything at all, he looked out at the pale morning sky. If he closed one eye, a flaw in the glass, tear-shaped, widened out in the sky, forming as it were a great white cleft. He heard his mother, entering the room breathlessly, cry out: "But what are you doing here? The taxi's down there, waiting"; and it was only then that he could make the effort to move. Formerly he would never have been able to resist the paltry infection of the fuss of departure, even if he showed it only by the display of a hostile phlegm. But this time, as he realized, he was truly indifferent as to whether he went or did not go, arrived or did not arrive. There were other trains, or—if it came to that—they could just stay. Later, while his mother was running nervously from one office to another, buying the tickets and getting them stamped, he let himself sink again into the depths of that satisfying inertia. Sitting on a suitcase, beneath the black and noisy dome of the station, among the rush and chatter of the crowd, he almost forgot that he was on the point of starting on a journey. Like a thread that is too weak, his participation in outside life snapped continually, and he did not trouble to refasten it.

But there was his mother, as there had been the taxi, as there would be the train and all those other means by which his inertia could be transported through space.— That same train, he could not help thinking as he obediently followed the luggage-laden porter, against which he had vomited months before, coming back from his holiday, in that crazy revolt of his whole body. Once in the train he closed his eyes drowsily as he sat holding the bundle of newspapers and reviews that his mother had bought for him. He heard the engine whistle and was conscious that beneath him the wheels were beginning to turn, and he continued to doze. When he opened his eyes again he was surprised to see the suburbs slipping past the window below the railway embankment. Through top floor windows he could see people moving about in rooms among unmade beds they had just left. Whistling, the train steadily gathered speed, the houses became more and more rare, and then, after the train had crossed a bridge at full speed and with a tearing clatter, the country began.

The train rushed on, and he felt this rushing movement as a delicious contrast to his own inertia. What else was the train, in relation to him, but a thing with a purpose, a direction, a will—as, previously, the nurse's passion had been, and his parents' solicitude? He thought that it would be fine to go on like this all one's life. The train, the nurse, his parents—these would be succeeded by larger, if not more mysterious, forces; and he would trust himself to them with equal confidence and equal delight. He saw himself as a ragged, wounded, hungry soldier, in an army of whose orders and objectives he knew nothing; as a beggar, in a misery for which he was not responsible and of which he was not even conscious; rich, with wealth of which he had not earned one halfpenny; exalted to a power which he had never sought; a priest in a church of which he did not know the rites; and finally dead—the last delight—through a catastrophe which he had neither foreseen nor wished to avoid. The rattling of the train as it crossed the switches, the swift, regular beat of the wheels, the whistle of the engine tearing to shreds the silence of the countryside, even the backward flight of that same countryside past the train windows—all these stimulated the flow of his thoughts. Yes, he was now in the midst of a broad, swirling, powerful stream in which he was but a straw that cannot help being carried along, scarcely hoping to keep afloat to the end. And closing his eyes, he abandoned himself to it trustfully, as he had abandoned himself, a few days before in the arms of the nurse.

In fact, he closed his eyes to examine this thought more carefully; and his mother, anxious for his comfort and thinking he wished to sleep, put a cushion behind his head with gentle and loving hands. Until then he had not thought of the nurse except with vague reference to that initiation of which she had been the unconscious instrument. Now he sought to define in his own mind the true and deeper meaning of that initiation. He remembered that at the moment of the embrace he had felt a sudden, strong desire to enter completely, with the whole of his body, into the woman's belly, and to curl up there, in that warm, rich darkness, just as he had lain curled up before he was born. But now he understood that that womb was nothing else than the womb of life itself, hitherto repudiated by him but which the woman, imperiously, had compelled him to accept. Yes, he concluded, that is what life should be: not sky and earth and sea, not human beings and their organizations, but rather a dark, moist cavern of loving, maternal flesh into which he could enter confidently, sure that he would be protected there as he had been protected by his mother all the time she was carrying him in her womb. Life meant the sinking of oneself in this flesh and feeling its darkness, its engulfing power, its convulsion, to be beneficent, vital things. Suddenly he understood the significance of the sense of relief that had refreshed him while the nurse was crushing him in her embrace.

This thought kept him company during the whole afternoon, and after supper, when the sleeping berths were let down and his mother and he had gone to bed, for a good part of the night until he fell asleep. While he was asleep, the train crossed a long steel bridge over a very broad river, and he heard the resounding din of the girders beneath its weight. Much later, he was aware of a lively clatter of voices and of echoing footsteps in a sudden stillness, and realized that the train had come into a big station and stopped there. But this was still in the depths of the night, and turning over on his side he went off to sleep again and was not conscious either of the train shunting as it changed engines, nor of its leaving the station again. He went on sleeping, waking every now and again and becoming conscious of the movement of the train with the same pleasure each time. When he finally woke up the day was well advanced, and he knew by the slow and labored rhythm of the wheels that the train was going upgrade.

His mother helped him to wash and dress; then the porter put up the sleeping berths and he sat by the window and looked out at the landscape. The train was close by the side of a mountain and was turning and twisting round a narrow gorge at the bottom of which could be seen a rushing torrent. Another mountain slope rose steeply on the far side of the torrent, shutting out the sky. Luca gazed at the foaming waters of the torrent, at the uptorn masses of rock round which the waters dashed and broke, and at the thick pine forests which flowed down the mountainside till they bathed their roots in those tumultuous waves. In the pale light of the cloudy morning the water of the torrent looked dirty, grayish-white in color, the rocks a rusty red and the pines a dark, melancholy, dim green. An air of ancient and indifferent dullness inclosed this alpine solitude. It was the first time Luca had seen the mountains and thought they were not so beautiful as he had believed; and he felt disappointed.

But the train, as it wound around the side of the mountain, came out into an open place and Luca saw, at the far end of the gorge, towering above two smaller mountains entirely covered with forest, a snow-covered peak which looked to him immensely high. The clouds in the sky had parted and the sun, lighting up this distant snow, made it sparkle. And then, he did not know why, at the sight of that untouched whiteness, so majestic and so lonely, a sudden elation seized him. The idea of being carried along and of trustfully allowing himself to be carried toward an unknown goal came back to him; but this time it was to some extent modified by the entirely new feeling of being carried and of allowing himself to be carried toward those snows that were so lofty and so white. He kept his wide open eyes fixed on the mountain peak; and the more he looked, the more he felt that trustful, drunken exultation growing within him. He knew there was no material reason for rejoicing just because he caught sight of the snowy top of a mountain; and yet he could not help realizing that it was that particular sight which started up the mechanism, so long dislocated, of his deepest hopes. Almost without meaning to, he turned toward his mother and asked: "What about the nurse?"

His mother, surprised, answered: "I suppose she's looking after some other invalid."

Yes, she looked after me well, thought Luca. And he said: "She was splendid . . . really, without her, I shouldn't have got well so quick."

"There's no need to exaggerate," said his mother, slightly offended at his forgetting the attentions that she herself had showered upon him, "but certainly she was excellent."

"Yes, she was splendid," repeated Luca.

"By the way," said his mother, "she must have got quite fond of you. She telephoned several times to know how you were."

"And what did you answer?"

"That you were quite well again."

Luca closed his eyes. At that same moment the train, with a long and mournful whistle, plunged into a tunnel. When he opened his eyes again he saw nothing but darkness, while a damp wind blew in his face from the dark walls of the tunnel, mixed with a faint drizzle of water and puffs of steam. Echoing from the vault of the tunnel, the beat of the wheels sounded to him like a monotonous, exultant voice repeating the same words over and over again. He seemed to be able to distinguish these words—the same words, full of hope, that had born him company ever since his awakening from delirium, day by day during his slow recovery; and he knew that, from now onward, not only the clatter of a train in a tunnel or the whiteness of snow on a mountain peak, but all things would have a meaning for him and would speak to him in their own mute language. Then the train, with another whistle, came out into the light of day.

CONJUGAL LOVE

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY ANGUS DAVIDSON

1

FIRST OF ALL I wish to speak of my wife. Loving, apart from many other things, means taking a delight in looking at and watching the loved one. Taking a delight, that is to say, in contemplating not merely the beauties but also the defects, whether they be few or many, of that person. From the very first days of our married life, I found an inestimable pleasure in looking at Leda (that is her name), and in studying even the most insignificant and fleeting movements and expressions of her face and body. My wife, at the time we were married (later, after she had borne three children, certain of her characteristics were, I do not say changed, but to some extent modified) was just over thirty years old. She was, if not exactly tall, above average height; and her face and figure were both very beautiful, though far from perfect. Her long, thin face had a withdrawn, dazed, almost obliterated look, like that of a classical deity in some old picture of mediocre quality in which the vagueness of the painting is increased by the patina of age. This strange look of intangible beauty seemed as though it might vanish at any moment, like a gleam of sunshine on a wall or the shadow of a cloud passing over the sea. It came without a doubt partly from her hair, which was metallic and fair and always a little untidy, with long trailing locks that seemed to suggest a quiver of fear or flight; and partly from her blue eyes, enormous and slightly slanting, with dilated, glistening pupils whose troubled, evasive glance suggested a state of mind both frightened and shy. Her nose was large and straight and nobly formed, her wide red mouth unusually sinuous in shape, and with a look of surly, heavy sensuality, the lower lip curving deeply back over a chin which was too small. It was an irregular face, but a very beautiful one with, as I have already said, an intangible beauty that at certain moments and in certain circumstances, as I shall explain later, seemed to dissolve and disappear. The same might be said of her body. From the waist up she was as slim and delicate as a young girl; but her hips, her belly, her legs, were solid, strong, adult, full of muscular energy and swagger. This lack of harmony, like the lack of harmony in her face, was neutralized by the beauty enveloping her from head to foot, in a halo of perfection, as though it were an impalpable attendant aura or a mysteriously transfiguring light. Strange to say, sometimes, as I looked at her, I actually thought of her as a person of classical form and features, without defects, all harmony and serenity and symmetry: to such an extent did this beauty, that for want of other words I am compelled to call spiritual, beguile and seduce me. But there were moments when the golden veil was torn, and then not only were the many irregularities revealed to me but I also saw a painful transformation of her whole personality.

I made this discovery during the first days of our married life and for a moment I had almost the feeling of having been deceived, like a man who, having married for money, discovers after the wedding that his wife is poor. At times, my wife's whole face would be twisted into a heavy, mute grimace in which fear, anguish and waywardness all seemed to be expressed, and, at the same time, an unwilling sexual attraction. This look would cause the natural irregularity of her features to leap to the eye, so to speak, in a most violent manner, giving her whole face the repellent appearance of a grotesque mask in which, for the sake of a particular comic quality, partly obscene and partly painful, certain features had been deliberately exaggerated to the point of caricature: the mouth especially, and also the two lines at the sides of the mouth, and the nostrils and the eyes. My wife had the habit of painting her lips heavily with scarlet lipstick; and, being pale, she used to put rouge on her cheeks. These artificial colors were not noticeable when the expression of her face was calm, since they harmonized with the color of her eyes, her hair and complexion. But when she grimaced, they stood out, crude and flaming, and her face, a moment before so serene, so luminous, so classically beautiful, now brought to mind the ridiculous highly colored features of a carnival mask. And to this there was added that touch of obscenity that such physical distortions acquire from the softness and warmth of living flesh.

Her body, like her face, had a way of putting to flight the enchanted air of beauty, of performing ugly contortions. She would crumple up completely, as though in fear or disgust, her arms and legs thrust forward in an attitude of defense or aversion, like a dancer or mime whose aim is to excite her audience, but at the same time her body would bend backward in an inviting, provoking posture. She appeared to be thrusting away some imaginary danger and at the same time indicating by that vehement twisting of her hips that the danger of assault was not unwelcome. It was a graceless attitude, and accompanied as it sometimes was by the facial grimace, it made one doubt whether one was still face to face with the same person who a moment before had been so composed, so serene, so unspeakably lovely.

I have said that loving means loving everything about the beloved person, the defects just as much as the beauties. These occasional distortions, although extremely ugly, were soon just as dear to me as the beauty, the harmony, the serenity of the better moments. But loving, sometimes, also means not understanding; for if it is true that there is one form of love that implies full comprehension, it is also true that there is another, more passionate form that blinds one in regard to the loved one. I was not exactly blind; but I lacked the mental lucidity of a tested, long-standing love. I knew that in certain circumstances my wife became ugly and graceless; this seemed to me a curious fact and, like everything else about her, lovable; but beyond the establishment of the fact I was not able to go. Nor did I wish to.

I ought, at this point, to say that the grimace and the distortion occurred very rarely and never at intimate moments in our relationship. I do not remember any word or gesture of mine ever producing that strange transmutation of her face into a mask or of her body into a marionette. On the contrary, in our moments of love-making she seemed to achieve the highest degree of that unbelievable, unspeakable beauty of hers. At such times the dilated, moist pupils of her great eyes held a troubled appeal that was gentle and sweet and more expressive than any speech; her mouth seemed to proclaim, through the sensuality and the sinuosity of her lips, a capricious, intelligent kindness all its own; and her whole face welcomed my gaze like a mysterious but reassuring mirror to which the fair, tousled hair made a worthy frame. Her body seemed to fall into its loveliest shape, lying there innocent and languid, without strength and without shame, like a promised land that displayed itself, all open and golden, with its fields and rivers, its hills and valleys, to the farthest horizon. The unpleasant looks, when they did occur, were produced by the most unexpected and unimportant circumstances; it will be enough if I mention just a few of them. My wife has always been a great reader of detective stories. I noticed that when she reached the point where the plot became most enthralling and most frightening, her face would gradually twist itself into that grimace; and it would not disappear until the end of the passage that had induced it. My wife was likewise very fond of gambling. I was with her at Campione, at Monte Carlo, at San Remo; and every single time, after she had made her stake and the wheel was going around and the ball jumping from number to number, her face would take on that ugly grimace. Finally, even the act of inserting a piece of thread into the eye of a needle sufficed to make her grimace; or a child running along the edge of a brook at the risk of falling in; or even a drop of cold water down her back.

I want, however, to mention at greater length two cases in which it seemed to me that this strange transformation of hers had more complicated origins. One day we happened to be in the garden of our country villa and I was struggling to pull up a tall, overgrown weed, almost a bush, which had somehow grown up in the middle of the open space in front of the house. It was not easy, because the green, moist plant was slippery to my grasp and had very deep roots. While intent on this operation I happened to glance up at my wife, and was astonished to see that both her face and body were completely transformed by the usual ugly looks and contortions. At the same moment the plant, yielding to my weight, leaped out of the ground with its single long, sinewy root, and I fell over backward on to the gravel.

On another occasion we had invited a few friends to dinner at our house in Rome. Before the guests arrived my wife, already dressed for the evening and wearing her jewelry, decided to pay a visit to the kitchen to see that all was in order. I followed her. We found the cook in a state of terror over a lobster, an enormous creature with formidable claws and still half alive, which she did not dare to grasp and throw into the pot. Without the slightest fuss my wife went over to the table, picked up the lobster by the back and plunged it into the boiling water. In order to do this, she had, I admit, to keep herself as far away as possible both from the creature and from the cooking-stove. But this prudence on her part only partly explains the ugly, grotesque face that she made and the clearly visible movement of that body, which for a moment looked as though she were trying to execute a provoking shake of the hips beneath the glossy silk of her evening dress.

I imagine that my wife must have gone through this countless times and on the most diverse occasions. There remain, however, certain incontestable facts. The contraction of the face and body never happened during love-making. Such contractions, also, were accompanied always by the most profound silence, a silence of suspense which nevertheless seemed more like a repressed cry than a mere calm absence of speech. Finally, the grimace and the contraction of the body seemed always to arise from fright at some unexpected, sudden, lightning-like occurrence. It was a fright, as I have observed, that was closely mingled with sexual attraction.

2

So FAR I have spoken of my wife; it is time that I say something of myself. I am tall and thin, with an energetic face and marked, sharp features. Perhaps, on closer examination, certain weaknesses might be discerned in the form of my chin and the shape of my mouth; but the fact remains that I have a strong, determined face which does not at all represent my true character, though it partly explains some contradictions in it. Perhaps my most noteworthy characteristic is lack of depth. Whatever I do or say, the whole of me is contained in what I do or say, and I have nothing in reserve upon which to fall back in the event of my having to retreat. I am, in fact, a man all vanguard, without any main body or rearguard. From this characteristic comes my proneness to enthusiasm: I get excited over any trifle. This enthusiasm of mine, however, is rather like an uncontrolled horse taking a very high fence, having already thrown its rider, who is left in the dust ten yards behind. What I mean is that it is an enthusiasm that almost always lacks the support of the intimate, effective strength without which any kind of enthusiasm dwindles into mere foolish desire and rhetoric. And I am, in fact, inclined to rhetoric—that is, to the substitution of words for deeds. My rhetoric is of the sentimental kind; I want, for instance, to be in love and often deceive myself into thinking that I *am* in love, when all that I have done is talk about it—with great feeling, no doubt, but nevertheless simply *talking*. At such moments tears come easily, I stammer, I assume all the attitudes of overflowing emotion. But beneath these outward signs of fervor I often conceal a bitter, a positively mean kind of subtlety which makes me deceitful and does not represent any real strength, being merely the expression of my egoism.

For all those who knew me superficially I was, before I met Leda, what can still be called—but not perhaps for very much longer—a dilettante. A man, that is, who is sufficiently well off to lead a life of leisure, and who devotes that leisure to the understanding and enjoyment of art in its various forms. I suppose that such an assessment, anyhow as regards the part that I played in society, was on the whole just. But when I was alone with myself, I was anything but a dilettante: I was a man tormented with anxiety and always on the border of despair. There is among the works of Poe a story which accurately describes the state of my mind at that time; it is the one in which he relates the adventure of the fisherman who is drawn with his boat into the coils of a whirlpool at sea. In his boat he circles around the walls of the abyss, and with him, above, beside and below him, circle the innumerable remains of former shipwrecks. He knows that as he goes round and round he is approaching nearer and nearer to the bottom of the whirlpool where death awaits him, and he knows where all those derelicts come from. Well, my life might have been compared to a perpetual whirlpool. I was held in the swirls of a black vortex, and above me, beneath me, and all round me I saw all the things I loved circling round with me—those things upon which, according to others, I lived, but which I saw overwhelmed with me in the same strange shipwreck. I felt that I was going round in a circle with everything good and beautiful that had ever been created in the world, and I did not cease for one single moment to see the black depth of the vortex that held for me and all the other derelicts the promise of an inevitable end. There were times when the whirlpool seemed to grow narrower, to flatten out, to go round more slowly and restore me to the calm surface of everyday life; there were also moments when its circles spun swifter and deeper, and then down I would go, whirling round and round, lower and lower, and down would go with me all human art and science. It was then I longed to be finally swallowed up. In my younger days these crises were frequent, and I can say with truth that there was not a single day between my twentieth and thirtieth years when I did not cherish the idea of suicide. Of course I did not really wish to kill myself (otherwise I should have done so), but this obsession with suicide nevertheless supplied the predominant color of my mental landscape.

I thought often of possible remedies; and soon I realized that there were only two things that could save me—the love of a woman and artistic creation. It may seem ridiculous for me to mention two things of such importance in so casual a manner, as though it were a matter of a couple of ordinary quack remedies that could be bought at any drug store; but this summary statement merely shows the extreme clarity I had attained by the time I was about thirty-five with regard to the problems of my life. As for love, it seemed to me that I had as much right to it as all other men on this earth; and as for artistic creation, I was convinced that I was led naturally toward it both by my tastes and also by a talent that I was under the illusion that I possessed in my better moments.

What happened, on the contrary, was that I never went beyond the first two or three pages of any composition; and with women I never attained that depth of feeling that convinces both ourselves and others. The thing that did me most harm in both my sentimental and creative efforts was, precisely, that facility of mine for enthusiasm, which was just as prompt to be kindled as it was quick to fade. How many times—in a kiss snatched from unwilling lips, in two or three pages written at furious speed—did I think I had found what I was seeking! And then, with the woman, I would slip at once into a wordy sentimentality that ended by alienating her from me; and, as I wrote, I would lose myself in sophistries or in a flood of words into which, for lack of serious inspiration, I was led by a momentary facility. My first impetus was good, and deceived both myself and others; but then some indefinable weakness, cold and discursive, would creep in. And I would realize that in truth I had not loved or written so much as *wished* to love and to write. Sometimes, too, I would find a woman who, either for her own advantage or out of pity, was prepared to allow herself to be taken in and to delude me as well; on other occasions the written page seemed to resist me and to invite me to continue. But I have one good thing about me—a diffident conscience which halts me in time upon the path of illusion. I would tear up the pages and, under some pretext or other, stop visiting the lady. And so, in such vain attempts, youth fled by.

3

THERE IS NO NEED for me to say where and how I first met my wife: it must have been in a drawing room, or at a spa, or somewhere like that. She was about my own age, and it seemed to me that in many respects her life resembled mine. This was true, actually, in only a few respects, and superficial ones at that—merely that she, like me, was well off and leisured and that she moved in the same circles and led the same kind of life. But to me, with my usual ephemeral enthusiasm, this seemed a most important thing, almost as though I had found my twin soul. She had been married very young, at Milan, her native town, to a man she did not love. The marriage had lasted a couple of years and then they had separated and later had obtained a divorce in Switzerland. Since then my wife had always lived alone. The thing that at once aroused in my mind the hope that I had at last found the woman I was looking for, was the confession she made to me the day I met her for the first time: that she was weary of the life she had led and that she wanted to settle down in an alliance of true affection. In this confession, which was made with great simplicity and without any emotion—just as though it were a question of a practical program rather than the pathetic aspiration of a loveless life—I seemed to recognize the same state of mind that had dominated me for so many years; and immediately, with my usual initial impulsiveness, I decided that she must be my wife.

I don't think Leda is very intelligent; nevertheless she succeeded in acquiring in my eyes a mysterious authority, thanks to the importance she assumed in my life, and to her air of experience and her nicely calculated mingling of indulgence and irony. Because of this, her slightest gesture of understanding and encouragement was both precious and flattering. I was under the illusion at that time that I had persuaded her to marry me; but I can now say that it was she who had determined upon it and that without that determination on her part the marriage would never have taken place. I was still in the preliminary stages of my courtship, which I imagined would be long and difficult, when she, almost forcing my hand, gave herself to me. But this surrender, which in other women would have seemed to me to be the sign of a facile virtue and would perhaps have made me contemptuous, in her had the same rare and flattering quality as her earlier marks of approbation and encouragement. After I had possessed her, I realized that that mysterious authority of hers remained intact, that it was, in fact, strengthened by the impatience of my senses which had hitherto been unawakened. Before, she had played upon my need of being understood; now, with far greater and more instinctive intelligence, she played upon my desire. Thus I discovered that the fleeting, evasive character of her beauty was matched by an analogous character of mind. I was never sure of possessing her completely; and just when I felt I was verging upon satiety, a word or gesture on her part would make me afraid that I was losing her again. These alternations of possession and despair lasted right up to the day of our wedding. By now I was furiously in love with her, and I understood that at all costs I had to prevent this love from coming to an end like the others that had gone before it—in discouragement and emptiness. Urged on by this fear and at the same time reluctant, and thinking that I was doing a thing that was altogether too easy, I at last asked her to become my wife, with the certainty of being immediately accepted. Instead of that, I found myself met by an almost astonished refusal, as though in making this proposition I had transgressed some mysterious law of good manners. With this refusal I felt I had reached the darkest depths of my ancient despair. I left her, thinking confusedly that there was nothing left for me and that if I was not a coward the time had now come for me to kill myself. A few days went by and then she telephoned me, asking with surprise why I had not been to see her. I went, and she welcomed me with the sweet but impudent reproof that I had deserted her and had not given her time to reflect. She concluded by saying that, after all, she would agree to become my wife. In two weeks' time we were married.

There began, at once, a period of complete happiness such as I had never known. I loved Leda passionately; yet at the same time I continued to be afraid either that I would stop loving her or that I would stop being loved by her. And so I tried by every possible means to mingle our two lives together, to create bonds between us. As I knew her to be ignorant, I first of all proposed to her a sort of program of æsthetic education, telling her that she would find just as much pleasure in learning as I should in teaching her. I discovered her, quite unexpectedly, to be extraordinarily docile and sensible. By mutual agreement we arranged a plan and a timetable for our studies, and I undertook to communicate to her, and to make her appreciate, everything that I myself knew and liked. I do not know how far she followed me nor how much she understood: probably very much less than I thought. But, as always, owing to that strange, mysterious authority of hers, I felt I had won a great victory when she said simply: "I like this piece of music . . . this poem is beautiful . . . read me that passage again . . . let's hear that record over again." At the same time, in order to occupy our leisure hours, I was teaching her English. In this she made steady progress, for she had a good memory and a natural inclination. But readings, explanations, lessons were all made attractive and precious in my eyes by her constant kindness and loving affection and goodwill. So that, in a sense, although she was the learner and I the teacher, it was I who felt all the trepidations of the pupil as he progresses slowly through the subjects of his study. And this was right, because the real subject of study between us was love, and every day I seemed to myself to gain a fuller mastery of it.

And indeed, in spite of everything, the surest foundation of our happiness still lay in our love life, which was a thing apart from the tastes that we now shared. I have said already that her beauty, disturbed as it sometimes was by ugly grimaces and contortions, was never unworthy of itself while we were making love. Let me add that the enjoyment of that beauty had now become the central point around which circled the whirlpool of my life, once black and threatening, now luminous, pleasantly slow, regular. How often, as I lay beside her in bed, I contemplated her naked body and felt almost frightened at seeing it so beautiful, a beauty that even under my persevering gaze defied all definition! How often, as she lay there flat on her back with her head sunk in the pillow, I tousled and rearranged those long, soft, fair tresses of hers, seeking to understand the mysterious feeling of movement that gave them that fluttering, evasive look! How often I gazed at those enormous blue eyes of hers and wondered where lay the secret of their sweet, troubled expression! How often, after kissing her long and furiously, I analyzed the sensation my lips still retained, comparing it with the exact shape of *her* lips and hoping to penetrate the significance of that faint smile of almost archaic form which, after the kiss, became visible again at the corners of her big, sinuous mouth —precisely the smile that is to be seen in the earliest Greek statues. I had found a mystery as great—or so it seemed to me—as the mysteries of religion: a mystery close to my own heart, in which my eyes and my mind, well used to the examination of beauty, could lose themselves at last and find peace, as though in an enchanting, unlimited spaciousness. She appeared to understand all the importance that this kind of adoration acquired for me and allowed herself to be loved with the same untiring docility, the same intelligent complacency with which she allowed herself to be taught.

Perhaps I ought to have been put on my guard, in the midst of a happiness so complete, by one particular aspect of my wife's attitude, which, anyhow, I think I have already mentioned—her goodwill. In her, clearly, love was not so spontaneous as in me; and there was discernible in her manner an undoubted though mysterious desire to please me, to satisfy me, sometimes even to flatter me—exactly, in fact, what is generally, and not without a trace of contempt, called goodwill. Now it is difficult for goodwill not to conceal something which, if it were by chance revealed, would contradict it and endanger its effects; something that may range from the mere presence of different, hidden preoccupations to actual duplicity and treachery. But I accepted this goodwill as a proof of her love for me and did not worry, at the time, to investigate what it might conceal, or what the meaning of it might be. I was, in fact, too happy not to be selfish. I knew that for the first time in my life I was in love and, with my usual, rather indiscreet enthusiasm, I attributed to her also the feeling that occupied my own mind.

4

I NEVER SPOKE to my wife about my literary ambitions because I felt that she would not be able to understand them, and also because I was ashamed to have to confess that they were no more than ambitions, or rather, vain attempts which had never so far been crowned with any success. That year we spent the summer at the seaside, and toward the middle of September we began to discuss our plans for the autumn and winter. I don't know how it came about that I alluded to my barren efforts; perhaps I may have referred to the long period of idleness into which marriage had led me. "But Silvio, you never told me about it," she exclaimed. I answered that I had never spoken of it because, until that moment at least, I had never succeeded in writing anything worth talking about. But she, with her usual affectionate eagerness, urged me to show her something I had written. I realized immediately that her curiosity flattered me enormously and that in the long run her opinion was just as important to me, if not more important, than that of a professional man of letters. I knew perfectly well that she was unlearned, that her taste was unreliable, that her approval or her condemnation could have no value; and yet I felt that it now depended upon her whether I continued to write or not. When she insisted, I put up a show of resistance for a short time, and then, having warned her repeatedly that the things I had written were unimportant and that I myself had rejected them, I agreed to read her one of my short stories written a couple of years before. As I read, it seemed to me that my story was not as bad as I had formerly thought it; and so I went on reading in a firmer and more expressive tone of voice, looking at her every now and then out of the corner of my eye as she sat listening attentively, not showing in any way what effect it was having upon her. When I had finished, I threw the pages aside and exclaimed: "As you see, I was right, it was not worth talking about." And I waited with a strange anxiety for her opinion. She was silent for a moment, as though collecting her impressions, and, then she declared, in a decided and peremptory manner, that I was entirely wrong in not attributing any importance to my talent. She said she liked the story although it had many defects, and she adduced a number of reasons to explain and justify her pleasure. It was not (and how could it have been?) the criticism of an expert; but all the same I felt curiously encouraged. It seemed to me that her reasons, which were indeed those of an ordinary person with ordinary tastes, might well be worth those of the most refined men of letters; that, after all, there was perhaps in me a tendency to excessive self-criticism, more injurious than useful; and that, in fact, what I had hitherto lacked was not so much talent, perhaps, as affectionate encouragement such as she was at that moment heaping upon me. There is always something false and humiliating in a success among one's own family, among people whose affection makes them indulgent and partial. A mother, a sister, a wife are always ready to recognize in us the genius that others obstinately deny us, but at the same time their praises do not satisfy us, and we sometimes feel them to be more bitter than frank condemnation. I felt nothing of all this with my wife. It seemed to me that she had really liked the story, quite apart from the affection that she bore me. Besides, her praises were discreet and reasoned enough not to seem mere pitying. I asked her, in the end, almost timidly: "Well then, you really think I ought to go on and persevere? . . . Think well over what you say. . . . I've been working for at least ten years without any result. . . . If you tell me to go on, I'll go on . . . but if you tell me to stop, I'll stop and never touch a pen again."

She laughed and said: "You're putting a great responsibility on me."

I insisted: "Speak as though I were not what I am in relation to you, but a stranger. . . . Say exactly what you think."

"But I've already told you," she replied, "you ought to go on."

"Truly?"

"Yes, truly."

She was silent for a moment and then added: "Now look . . . let's do this. . . . Instead of going back to Rome, let's go and spend a month or two at the villa in Tuscany. . . . You can get down to work there, and I'm sure you'll write something really good."

"But you—you'll be bored."

"Why? *You*'ll be there . . . besides, it'll be a change for me . . . it's so many years since I've led a quiet life."

I must admit that it was not so much her reasons and her encouragements that persuaded me as a kind of superstition. I thought that for the first time in my life a kindly star was watching over me, and I said to myself that I ought to assist, in every possible way, this unexpected trend of fortune in my favor. With my wife I had already found the love to which I had aspired in vain for so many years; and perhaps love would now be followed, in its turn, by literary creativeness. I felt I was on the right road; and that the beneficial effects of our meeting were not yet entirely exhausted. I embraced my wife, telling her jokingly that from henceforth she would be my Muse. She did not seem to understand the expression, and asked me again what my decision was.

I answered that, as she had suggested, we would go to the villa in a few days. A week later we left the Riviera for Tuscany.

5

THE VILLA lay in a kind of hollow, at the foot of some medium-sized mountains, facing a wide, flat, cultivated plain. It was surrounded by a small park thickly planted with leafy trees; so that there was no view at all, even from the windows of the top floor, and one could imagine oneself, not at the edge of a plain studded with farms and crisscrossed with fields, but in the depths of a great forest, in a hermit-like solitude. In the plain, not far from the villa, lay a big village. The nearest town, on the other hand, was an hour's cart-ride away, on the top of one of the hills that rose at the back of the villa. It was a medieval town, surrounded by battlemented walls, with palaces, churches, convents, museums; but, as often happens in Tuscany, it was much poorer than the ugly modern village that commerce had brought into being in the plain below.

The villa had been built about a hundred years ago—judging by the height and size of the trees in the park. It was a plain, regular building, with three floors and three windows to each floor. At the front of the house was an open, graveled space, shaded by two horsechestnut trees. From this space a winding drive led to the park gate and then, beyond, along the old surrounding wall to the main road. The park, as I have already said, was small in extent but thickly timbered and full of shady retreats; its limits were not clearly defined except on one side. On the other sides, without hedges or other dividing lines, the shade of the wood merged into the openness of the cultivated fields. There were a couple of farms attached to the property; and the farm buildings were situated at the edge of the park, on a hill from which one enjoyed a view over the whole of the immense plain. From the villa one could hear, without seeing them, the peasants in the neighboring fields, urging on their oxen with brief cries; and quite often the farmer's hens would wander all over the park and come pecking right up to the front door.

Inside, the villa was crammed with pieces of old furniture, in which every style of the last century was represented, from Empire down to "art nouveau." The last inhabitant, my maternal grandmother, had died there at the age of almost a hundred after having collected with the avarice and patience of an ant, enough stuff to set up another house of the same size. The rooms contained double the amount of furniture that was needed; and drawers, cupboards and chests were overflowing with a mass of heterogeneous objects—crockery, linen, knickknacks, rags, old papers, kitchen utensils, lamps, photograph albums and endless other things. The bedrooms were large and dark, with four-posters, vast chests-of-drawers, dim family portraits. There were, besides, an indefinite number of sitting rooms, a library with a great many shelves full of old books, most of them volumes on the writings of the Fathers, almanacs, and collections of reviews, and even a small bare room entirely taken up with a billiard table; but the cloth was torn and there were hardly any cues left and no billiard balls. One moved about with difficulty among all this creaking old junk; there was no free space anywhere. It was as though the real inhabitants of the villa were the pieces of furniture and we merely intruders. However, I succeeded in partly clearing the first-floor sitting room, restoring its original fine Empire appearance; and there I established my own study. We each chose a bedroom; and my wife took as her own sitting room the drawing room on the ground floor in which were the only two comfortable armchairs in the house.

We began, from the very first day, to lead a very regular life, almost like that of an industrious monastery. In the morning the old servant carried the tray into my wife's room and we had breakfast together, she in bed and I sitting beside her. Then I left her, went into my study, sat down at the desk and worked, or at least tried to work, until midday. In the meantime my wife, after lying in bed for a little, would get up, make a lengthy and meticulous toilet and while she was dressing give the cook her orders for the day. Around noon I would leave my work and go downstairs, where my wife would be waiting for me. We took our meals in a small dining room, in front of a French window overlooking the park. After lunch we drank our coffee outside, in the shade of the chestnut tree. Then we would go up to our rooms for a short rest. We met again at tea in the drawing-room on the ground floor.

There weren't many places to walk; Tuscany is more like a garden, though without seats or paths, than open country: so we went either along the winding tracks that led across the fields from one farm to another; or we walked along the grassy bank of a canal that crossed the whole length of the plain; or, again, we strolled along the main road, but without ever going as far as either the village or the town. When we returned from our walk, which never lasted more than an hour, I gave my wife her English lesson and then, if there was still time, I read aloud to her or made her read to me. Then we dined, and after dinner we read again or conversed. Finally we went, not very late, to our rooms, or rather I followed my wife into hers. This was our moment for making love—toward which, in truth, our whole day had been tending. I found my wife always ready and always docile, as though she were conscious of providing both herself and me with a reward and an outlet after so many hours of tranquillity. In the rustic night that looked in through the wide-open windows, its deep silence broken only at rare intervals by the cry of a bird, in that dim and lofty room, our love would burst into sudden flame and burn long and silently, clear and living like the flame of the old oil lamps that once had illumined those sombre apartments. I felt that I loved my wife more each day, the feeling of each evening nourishing itself and gathering strength from that of the evening before; and she, on her side, seemed never to exhaust the treasure of her affectionate, sensual compliance. During those nights, for the first and, perhaps, the last time in my life, I seemed to grasp the meaning of what true conjugal passion can be—that mixture of violent devotion and lawful sensuality, of exclusive, limitless possession and confident joy in that possession. For the first time I understood the sometimes indiscreet sense of ownership that some men attach to the marriage relationship, saying "my wife" in the same way that they say "my house" or "my dog" or "my car."

The thing which, on the other hand, did not go too well, though conditions were so favorable, was my work. My idea was to write a long story or a short novel, and the subject, the story of a marriage, interested me passionately. It was *our* story, the story of my wife and me, and I felt that I had the whole thing already fixed in my mind, separated into single, distinct episodes, so that it could be filled out with the greatest ease. But when I sat myself down in front of my paper and started trying to write, the thing would get all tangled up. Either the sheet would be filled with words and phrases crossed out, or I would go straight ahead for a page or two and then realize that I had been piling up a mass of vague generalizations and sentences without concrete meaning. Or again, after writing the first few lines, I would stop and remain motionless and absorbed in front of the blank page, looking as if I were in the act of reflecting deeply, but, in reality, with an empty head and a mind that had ceased to function. I have a highly developed critical sense, and for some years I wrote criticisms for newspapers and reviews; therefore, I soon realized that my work not only was not progressing but was actually going worse than it had before. Formerly I had been capable of fixing my mind on a subject and developing it, so to speak, in an orderly manner, without, it is true, ever achieving to poetry, but always keeping up a certain standard of elegance and clarity in my writing. Now, on the other hand, I saw that it was not only the subject-matter but also my former control of style that was eluding me. In spite of myself, some malign force would cram my page with repetitions, solecisms, obscure, limping sentences, vague adjectives, over-emphatic idioms, commonplaces, hackneyed phrases. Above all I was clearly conscious that what I lacked was rhythm—I mean that regular, harmonious breath that sustains the process of development in prose, as meter sustains and regulates that of poetry. I remembered that once upon a time I had possessed this rhythm—in a very measured and modest, but still sufficient, degree. But that too had now deserted me: I stumbled and stammered and lost myself in a ferment of discord and clamor.

Perhaps I should have let my work go altogether, since the love I felt for my wife sufficed for my happiness, if it had not been that she herself urged me to persevere. Not a day passed that she did not ask me, with an affectionate and exacting solicitude, how my work was going; and I, ashamed of confessing that it was not going at all, answered her rather vaguely that it was progressing steadily. She seemed to attach the greatest importance to this work, as though it were something for which she herself was responsible; and I felt more strongly every day that I now owed it not so much to myself as to her to accomplish the writing of my story. It was a proof of love that I had to furnish for her, as a demonstration of the profound change that her presence had wrought in my life. That was what I had meant when I had embraced her and whispered that henceforth she would be my Muse. With that daily enquiry of hers about the employment of my morning she had, without knowing it, ended by making it a point of honor with me—rather like the mythological ladies who ask the knight to slay the monster and bring back the golden fleece; and never has the fable been known in which a cowed and contrite knight has returned emptyhanded, confessing that he had been unable to find the fleece and that he had not had the courage to face the dragon. This point of honor took on an even more urgent and peremptory aspect owing to the particular character of her insistence, which was not that of a cultivated woman versed in the problems of intellectual labor but that of an ignorant and ingenuous mistress who probably imagined that writing was, after all, a simple matter of will and application. Once, during our daily walk, I tried to draw her attention to the many difficulties and the not infrequent impossibilities in literary creation; but I saw at once that she could not understand me. "I'm not a writer," she said, after listening to what I had to say, "nor have I any literary ambitions . . . but, if I had, I think I should have lots of things to say . . . and in the conditions for working that you have here, I'm sure I should be able to say them very well." She looked at me sideways for a moment and then added, with grave coquettishness: "Remember you promised to write a story with me in it . . . and now you must keep your promise." I said nothing, but I could not help thinking angrily of the many pages bristling with cancellations and superimposed lines piling up on my desk.

I had noticed that in the morning, after passing the night, or part of the night, with my wife, when I sat down to work I felt an almost uncontrollable inclination to let my mind wander and do nothing; my head felt empty, I had an odd sensation of lightness at the back of my neck and a sort of lack of solidity in my limbs. Our moral relationship with ourselves is sometimes extremely obscure; not so the physical relationship, which, particularly at a mature age, if a man is well balanced and healthy, reveals itself with perfect clarity. It did not take me much time or thought to conclude, rightly or wrongly, that this inability to work, this impossibility of keeping my mind on the subject, this temptation to idleness, must be attributed to the physical emptying of myself that occurred always after making love the previous night. Sometimes I would rise from my desk and look at myself in the mirror: in the tired, relaxed muscles of my face, in the shadows under my eyes and their lustreless expression, in the languid slackness of my whole attitude I could recognize precisely the lack of that vigor of which, on the other hand, I was conscious in myself every night, at the moment when I lay down and took my wife in my arms. I realized that I did not attack my paper because, the evening before, I had exhausted all my aggressive force in my wife's embrace; I knew that what I was giving to my wife I was taking away, in equal measure, from my work. This was not a precise thought—not as precise, anyhow, as it now appears when I express it; rather it was a diffused sensation, a persistent suspicion, almost the beginning of an obsession. My creative force, I felt, was drained out of me every night from the middle of my body; and next day there was not enough left to rise up and fortify my brain. The obsession, as can be seen, took shape in images, in comparisons, in concrete metaphors which gave me a physical, almost a scientific, sense of my own importance.

Obsessions either close up like abscesses that can find no outlet and slowly mature until their final, terrible outburst, or else, in more healthy persons, they sooner or later find some adequate means of elimination. I went on for several more days making love to my wife at night and spending the day thinking that it was just because I had made love to her that I could not work. At this point I should say that this obsession made no change whatever in my affection for my wife or in the actual physical transport: at the moment of love I forgot my scruples and almost deceived myself, in the temporary arrogance of desire, into thinking that I was strong enough to carry through both love-making and work. But next day the obsession would return; and at night I found myself seeking love again if only to console myself for having been defeated in my work and in order to rediscover the fleeting illusion of inexhaustible vigor. At last, after spinning around for some time in this vicious circle, I decided, one evening, to speak. I was encouraged to do this by the idea that it was she, after all, who urged me to work, and that if it was really of importance to her, as it seemed to be, that I should write the story, she would understand and accept my reasons. When we were lying side by side on the bed, I began: "Listen, I must tell you something I've never told you before."

It was hot, and we were both lying naked on top of the bedclothes, she on her back, with her hands clasped at the back of her neck and her head on the pillow, and I at her side. Scarcely moving her lips, and looking at me in her usual troubled, elusive way, she said: "Tell me."

"It's this," I went on. "You want me to write this story?"

"Certainly I do."

"This story which tells about you and me?"

"Yes."

"With things as they are now, I shall never succeed in writing it."

"What do you mean, things as they are now?"

I hesitated, and then said: "Listen, we make love every evening, don't we? Well, I feel that all the force that I need for writing this story is taken away from me when I'm with you. If it goes on like this, I shall never be able to write it."

She looked at me with those huge blue eyes of hers, which were dilated, one would have said, by the effort of understanding me. "But how do other writers manage?" she asked.

"I don't know how they manage. . . . But I imagine that they lead chaste lives, at any rate while they're working."

"But D'Annunzio," she said, "I've heard that he had such a number of mistresses . . . how did he manage?"

"I don't know," I answered, "whether he had such a great number of mistresses. What he had was a few celebrated mistresses, about whom everybody talked, he himself most of all . . . but in my opinion, he arranged his life very well. . . . Now Baudelaire's chastity, for instance, is well known."

She said nothing. I felt that all my reasoning came painfully close to the ridiculous, but I had begun now and I had to go on. I resumed, in a gentle, caressing tone of voice: "Look, I'm not really set on writing this story nor, in general, on becoming a writer. I'll give it up with the greatest ease. . . . The important thing, for me, is our love."

She answered at once, with a frown: "But I want you to write it. I want you to become a writer."

"Why?"

"Because you're a writer already," she said rather confusedly and almost with irritation. "I feel that you've got a great deal to say. . . . Besides, you ought to work, like everyone else. You can't just lead an idle life and be content simply to make love to me. You've got to become somebody." She stumbled over her words, and it was clear that she did not know how to express that stubborn desire of hers to see me do what she wanted me to do.

"There's no need for me to become a writer," I answered, though this time I felt I was telling anyhow a partial lie; "I can perfectly well not do anything . . . or rather, I can go on doing what I've done hitherto—read, appreciate, understand, admire the works of others . . . and love you. Or again, so as not to be idle, as you say, I could perhaps take up some other profession, some other occupation. . . ."

"No, no, no," she said hastily, shaking not only her head but her body too, as though she wanted to express this refusal with her whole self, "you've got to write—you've got to become a writer."

We were silent for awhile. Then she said: "If what you say is true . . . then we must change everything."

"What do you mean?"

"We mustn't make love any more until you've finished your story. . . . Then, when you've finished, we'll begin again."

I must confess that I was immediately tempted to accept this strange and slightly ridiculous proposal. My obsession was still strong and it made me forget how much selfishness, and therefore falseness, had been at the root of it. But I repressed this first impulse, and embracing her, said: "You love me and this proposal of yours is the greatest proof of your love that you could give me. . . . But the fact that you've made it is enough for me. Let's go on loving each other and not think about anything else."

"No, no," she said imperiously, pushing me away, "that's what we must do—now that you've told me."

"Are you offended?"

"Really, Silvio, why should I be offended? I truly want you to write that story, that's all. . . . Don't be silly." And as she said this, as if to underline the affectionate quality of her insistence, she put her arms round me.

We went on like this for a time, I defending myself and she insisting, imperious, inflexible. Finally I said: "All right, I'll try . . . it may be that all this isn't true and that I'm simply a person without any literary talent."

"That isn't true, Silvio, and you know it."

"All right then," I concluded with an effort, "as you like. . . . But remember it was you who wished it."

"Of course."

We were silent again for some time, then I made a movement as if to take her in my arms. But she pushed me away: "No," she said, "from this evening on we must stop doing that." She laughed, and as if to soften the bitterness of her refusal, took my face between her long, slim hands—delicately, as one takes hold of a precious vase—and said: "Now you'll see, you'll write all sorts of fine things—I'm sure of it." She looked closely at me, and then added in a strange way: "Do you love me?"

"You don't need to ask me that," I said, deeply moved.

"Well, you shall have me again only when you've read me the story. . . . Remember that."

"And supposing I'm not able to write it?"

"You've got to be able."

She was imperious; and this imperiousness of hers, ingenuous, inexperienced, but at the same time inflexible, was strangely pleasing to me. I thought again of the knight in the legend whose lady, in exchange for her love, demands that he shall kill the dragon and bring back the fleece; but this time I thought of him without anger, almost with admiration. She knew nothing of poetry, just as the lady probably knew nothing of the fleece and the dragon; but just because of this her command pleased me. It was as though it were a confirmation of the miraculous, heaven-sent character of all creative work. All at once there came to me a sudden exaltation mingled with confidence and hope and gratitude. I put my face close to hers, kissed her tenderly and whispered: "For love of you I will become a writer . . . not on my own merit, but for love of you." She said nothing. I got down from the bed and slipped out of the room.

After that I took up my work again with renewed courage. I soon realized that my calculations had not been wrong and that, somehow or other, even if there was not the connection between love and work I had tried to perceive, the obsession of impotence that had oppressed me previously could never have been dispelled except in the way I had chosen. Every morning I felt myself stronger, more aggressive as I faced my paper, more—at least, so it seemed to me—creative. And so, after love, the greatest aspiration of my life was fulfilled: poetry, too, smiled upon me. Every morning I wrote from ten to twelve pages, my pen flowing rapidly and impetuously but in no disorderly or uncontrolled fashion; and then, for the rest of the day, I was left dazed, stunned, half alive, with the feeling that outside my work nothing now mattered in my life, not even my love for my wife. All that remained after those ardent morning hours was the residue, the ashes and cinders of a glorious blaze; and until the new blaze was kindled next morning, I was left strangely inert and detached, filled with an almost morbid sense of well-being, indifferent to everything. I saw that if this rhythm continued, I should soon finish my work, perhaps even earlier than I had foreseen; and I felt that I must exert myself in every possible way to gather in the last grain of this bountiful and unexpected harvest. For the moment nothing else mattered. To say that I was happy would be saying too little, and at the same time too much: I was, for the first time in my life, outside myself, in an independent, perfect world made up of harmony and certainty. This state made me selfish; and I suppose that if my wife had fallen ill at that moment, I should have felt no other anxiety but that of a possible interruption of my work. Not that I did not love my wife; as I have said, I loved her more than ever: but she was, as it were, relegated to a detached, remote region, together with all the other things that had nothing to do with my work. In fact I was convinced, for the first time in my life, not only that I had found self-expression—a thing that I had attempted a thousand times without success—but also that my self-expression was taking a perfect and complete form. In other words, I had the sure sensation, founded, it seemed to me, on my experience as a man of letters, that I was writing a masterpiece.

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AFTER WORKING all the morning, I spent the afternoon in the usual way, being careful only to avoid sudden emotions and shocks and distractions. Though in appearance far removed from literature, I was in reality, in the dark depths of my mind, gloating with affectionate delight over what I had written during the morning and what I intended to write next day. Later, at bed-time, I said good-night to my wife on the landing between the doors of our two rooms, and went straight to bed. I slept with a feeling of confidence I had never known, conscious, as it were, that I was accumulating the fresh energies that I would expend upon my work next morning. On awaking I felt ready and well-disposed, light and vigorous, my head filled with ideas that had sprung up there during sleep like grass in a meadow during a night of rain. I sat down at my desk, hesitated only a minute, and then my pen, as if moved by an independent will, would start running over the sheets of paper, from one word to another, from one line to the next, as though between my mind and the ceaselessly unfolding arabesque of ink upon paper there were neither interruptions of continuity nor any difference in material. I had inside my head a large and inexhaustible reel of thread and, by my act of writing, all I did was to pull and unwind this thread, arranging it on the sheets of paper in the elegant black patterns of handwriting; and in this reel of thread there were no knots or gaps; and it went round and round in my head as I unwound it; and I had the feeling that the more I unwound it the more there was to unwind. As I have already said, I would write from ten to twelve pages, urging myself to the point of physical exhaustion, fearful above all that this flood of activity might, for some mysterious reason, suddenly decrease or even dry up altogether. At last, when I could do no more, I would rise from my desk with unsteady legs and a feeling of giddiness in my head, walk over to a mirror and look at myself. There in the mirror I could see, not one but two, or even three images of myself slowly doubling and redoubling as they mingled and crisscrossed each other. A long and careful toilet would put me right again, although, as I have said, I remained dazed and stunned all the rest of the day.

Later, at table, I ate with a hearty, automatic appetite, feeling that I was not a human being at all but an empty machine that required filling up again with fuel after several hours of fierce efficiency. As I ate I laughed and joked and even made puns—quite a new thing for one who is usually serious and thoughtful. As always happens with me when I yield to enthusiasm, there was a sort of indiscreet quality, almost an immodesty, in this exuberance of mine. I was aware of it, but whereas once I should have been ashamed of myself for giving way to it, I was now almost pleased with myself for displaying it. There I was, sitting at table, facing my wife, in the act of eating; but really I was not there at all. The best part of me had remained in my study upstairs, at the writing table, pen in hand. The rest of the day passed in the same atmosphere of gaiety—the rather disconnected, extravagant gaiety of a drunkard.

Had I been less enthusiastic, less intoxicated with good fortune, I might have recognized in the productiveness of those days the presence of that same quality of goodwill that I sometimes thought I could detect in my wife's attitude toward me. To express it differently, and without inferring that the story I was in process of writing was not the masterpiece I believed it to be, the thought might have entered my head that all this was too good to be true. Perfection is not a human thing; and more often than not, it resides in falsehood rather than in truth, whether that falsehood becomes established in the relations between us and other people or presides over the relations between us and ourselves. For, in order to avoid the ugly irregularities and roughnesses of the truth, a fabrication which achieves its purpose without obstacles or misgivings is more effective than a scrupulous mode of action which sticks closely to the matter in hand. As I have said, I might have become suspicious of my affairs going so smoothly, after ten or more years of fruitless attempts. But happiness, besides making us selfish, often makes us thoughtless and superficial as well. I told myself my meeting with my wife had been the spark that had at last set alight this great and generous blaze; and beyond the recognition of this fact I did not go.

I was so much absorbed in my work that I did not pay much attention to a small but curious incident that took place at that time. I have a very sensitive skin and shaving is always a difficulty to me—that is, it is inclined to produce a rash or other irritations. For this reason I have never been able to shave myself and have always made use, as I still do, of the services of a barber. At the villa, as everywhere else, I arranged to be shaved by a barber every morning. He came from the village nearby, where he kept the only barber's shop, which was, in truth, a very modest one. He used to come on a bicycle and made his appearance exactly at half-past twelve, having closed his shop at twelve. His arrival was the signal for me to stop work. It coincided likewise with the best moment of my day, with the release of that indiscreet and entirely physical gaiety I have already described, which came from a sense of work well done.

This barber was a short, broad-shouldered man, completely bald from front to back, with a thick neck and a plump face. In figure he was thickset but not fat. In his face, which was of a uniform yellowish brown so that he looked as though he still had the remains of an attack of jaundice, the most noticeable feature was the eyes, large and round with very conspicuous whites, and with a clear, questioning, surprised, possibly ironical look in them. He had a small nose and a wide but lipless mouth, in which his rare smiles disclosed two rows of dark and broken teeth. His chin retreated sharply, and in it was a strange, repellent dimple, like a navel. Antonio was his name and he had a voice soft and extraordinarily quiet; and his hand, as I noticed from the very first day, had an uncommon lightness and dexterity. He was a man of about forty and had a wife and five children. One last detail: he was not a Tuscan but a Sicilian, from a village in the middle of Sicily. As the result of an amorous affair he had indulged in during his military service, he had been induced to marry and settle down in this village, where he had subsequently opened a barber's shop. His wife worked on a farm, but she left it on Saturdays and helped her husband to shave the numerous clients who flocked to the shop on the day before the holiday.

Antonio was very punctual. Every day at half-past twelve I could hear, through the open window, the crunching of the gravel beneath his bicycle wheels in the drive below; and this, for me, was the signal for breaking off work. Presently later he would be knocking at the door of my study; and I, rising from my desk, would shout joyfully to him to come in. He would open the door, enter, close it again carefully and, with a slight bow, wish me good-morning. With him came the maid, carrying a small jug of boiling water which she would put down on a little wheeled table where soap, brush and razors were laid out. Antonio would push this little table close to the armchair in which I, in the meantime, had seated myself. He would spend some time stropping the razor, with his back turned to me; then, having poured some of the hot water into a small basin he would wet the brush and stir it round and round for a long time in the soap bowl. Finally, holding up the foamy brush in the air like a torch, he would turn toward me. The process of soaping me was interminable; he never left off until the whole of the lower part of my face was enveloped in an enormous mass of white froth. Only then did he put down the brush and take up the razor.

I have described these perfectly ordinary actions in minute detail so as to give a feeling of the slowness and precision of his movements—and at the same time to convey an idea of the readiness of my own mind to endure, in fact to enjoy, that slowness and that precision. Usually I do not enjoy being shaved, and the stupid fussiness of some barbers irritates me. But with Antonio it was different. I felt that the only time that had any value was the time that I spent at my desk, before his arrival. Afterwards, whether the time was devoted to shaving, or to reading or to conversation with my wife, it was all the same to me. It was all time that did not count, from the moment that it had nothing to do with my work; and how I employed it was a matter of indifference to me.

Antonio was taciturn; I, on the other hand, was not, for, after the restraint and the effort of my work, I felt an irresistible need for some sort of outlet for my happiness. And so I talked to him about anything that came into my head, about life in the village, about its inhabitants, about the harvest and his family and the local gentry and things like that. One subject that interested me more than others was, I remember, the contrast between the barber's birthplace in the south and his country of adoption. Nothing could be more different from Sicily than Tuscany. And indeed, more than once, I succeeded in drawing curious remarks from him about Tuscany and the Tuscans in which I thought I could detect a tinge of contempt and disgust. But for the most part Antonio would answer with extreme sobriety; yet, as I noticed, with remarkable exactness. He had a way of speaking that was terse, reticent, sententious, perhaps ironical, but with an irony so slight as to be intangible. Sometimes, if I was roaring with laughter at one of my own jokes or if I became heated as I was speaking, he would stop soaping my face or shaving me and, holding the brush or the razor in mid-air, would wait patiently until I was silent and calm again.

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IN TALKING TO HIM, I had no definite purpose in mind, as I think I have already made clear; yet after some time I realized that in spite of all the confidences I had forced from him, I had never penetrated the center of his mind nor fathomed its chief preoccupation. Although he was poor and had a large family, he did not seem to worry much about money. He spoke of his family with detachment, without either affection or severity or any other particular feeling, as one speaks of something inevitable and perfectly natural. In politics, I noticed, he took no interest at all. His trade, although he knew it thoroughly and liked his work, did not appear to mean anything more to him than the mere means of earning a living. In the end I said to myself that there was something mysterious about him; but not more so than in the case of many people of the working class, to whom wealthier people like to attribute thoughts and cares that match their position and then find that they are engrossed by the same things that matter to everybody.

While Antonio was shaving me, my wife would usually come into the room and sit in the sun in the open window, with her manicure case or a book. I do not know why, but this morning visit of my wife's while Antonio was shaving me gave me great pleasure. Like Antonio, she was a mirror in which I gazed at the reflection of my own happiness. Like Antonio, though in a different manner, by coming in and sitting down in the room where I had just been working, she helped to carry me back into the atmosphere of everyday life—I mean that indulgent, calm, ordered atmosphere that permitted me to go forward with my work in security and tranquillity. Every now and then I would interrupt my chatter with the barber and ask her how she was or what book she was reading or what she was doing. She would answer quietly, soberly, without raising her eyes and without breaking off her reading or the filing of her nails. The sun shone on her fair hair falling loose in two long waves on either side of her face; behind her bent head I could see, through the open window, no less luminous, the trees in the garden and the blue sky. This same sunshine awakened tawny reflections in the furniture, darted blinding rays from Antonio's razor, and spread benignly from the window sill to the most distant corners of the room, bringing to life the faded colors and dusty surfaces of the worn stuffs and the old tables and chairs. I was so happy that I thought:

"As long as I live, I shall remember this scene . . . myself lying back in the armchair, with Antonio shaving me . . . the window open, the room filled with sunshine and my wife sitting over there, in the sun."

One day my wife entered in a dressing gown and told Antonio that she wanted him to dress her hair for her. All that was needed, she said, was a touch with the curling iron; she had already washed it herself, that morning. She asked Antonio whether he knew how to wave hair, and when he said yes, she requested him to go to her room after he had finished with me. When my wife had gone out, I asked Antonio if he had ever been a ladies' hairdresser and he replied, not without vanity, that all the girls of the countryside came to him to have their hair done. I was surprised, and he assured me that nowadays even the most rustic peasant girls wanted permanent waves. "They're more particular than town ladies," he concluded with a smile; "they're never satisfied . . . sometimes they're enough to drive you mad." He shaved me with his usual slowness and precision. Then, after putting the razors all in order, he left me and went to my wife's room.

After Antonio had gone, I sat down in the sun in the armchair in which my wife generally sat, a book in my hand. I remember that it was Tasso's *Aminta*, which I had started to re-read at that time. I was conscious of being in a particularly lucid and sensitive state of mind and the charm of that lovely and graceful poem, matching so well the luminous, gentle quality of the day, soon made me forget that I was waiting. Now and then, at a more than usually melodious line, I would raise my eyes to the window, repeating it in my mind; and each time I made this movement I seemed to become conscious of my happiness, like someone who moves about in a well-warmed bed and is conscious, each time he moves, of its comfort. Antonio's job with my wife took about three-quarters of an hour. Finally I heard him go out to the drive, say goodbye to the maid in a quiet voice, and then I heard the crunch of the gravel under his bicycle wheels as he went farther and farther away. A few minutes later my wife came into the room.

I closed my book and got up to look at her. Antonio had solved the problem by covering her whole head with curls and transforming the smooth, loose arrangement of her hair into a sort of eighteenth-century wig. All those curls piled one on top of another and sprouting out round her long, thin face gave her, at first sight, an odd appearance, like a smartly dressed peasant woman. This look of rusticity was enhanced by a little bunch of fresh flowers—I think they were red geraniums—pinned on just above her left temple.

"Splendid!" I cried, with a burst of gaiety. "Antonio's certainly a wizard. . . . Mario and Attilio in Rome can go and bury their heads, they're not worthy even to tie his shoes. . . . You look just like one of the little peasant girls you see around here when they go to the fair on Sunday . . . and those flowers are really marvelous. . . . Let's look at you." As I said this I tried to make her turn slowly round, so as better to admire the barber's achievement.

But, to my surprise, my wife's face was clouded by an ill-humor that I could not account for. Her big lower lip was trembling—always a sign of anger with her. She pushed me away with a movement of intense disgust, saying: "Please don't make jokes. . . . I'm not at all in the mood for joking."

I did not understand, and I went on: "Come on, you don't need to be ashamed. I assure you, Antonio's done an excellent job . . . you look splendid. . . . Don't worry, you'll cut a good figure at the fair next Sunday—and if you go to the dance, you'll certainly have several proposals of marriage!"

As you can see, I imagined her ill-humor was due to what Antonio had done: I knew her to be extremely vain and it would not have been the first time that an unskillful hairdresser had aroused her anger. But she thrust me away again, this time with a look of resentment, and repeated: "I've already asked you not to make jokes."

It suddenly dawned upon me that her displeasure was caused by something other than her *coiffure.* "But why?" I asked. "What has happened?"

She had walked over to the window and was looking out, her two hands on the sill.

Suddenly she turned. "What has happened is that tomorrow you must kindly do me the favor of changing your barber. I don't want that Antonio here any more."

I was astonished. "But why? He's not a town barber, I know that of course . . . but he does all right for me. . . . *You* don't have to make use of him again."

"Oh, Silvio," she burst forth in anger, "why won't you understand me? It's not a question of whether he's good at his job—what does that matter?"

"But what's it all about, then?"

"He was disrespectful to me . . . and I don't want to see him any more—never again."

"He was disrespectful to you? What do you mean?"

There must have been in my expression and the tone of my voice still something of the thoughtless indifference that possessed me every morning at that time, for she added scornfully: "But what does it matter to you if Antonio is disrespectful to me? Of course it means nothing to you."

I was afraid I had offended her. Going up to her, I said, seriously: "Forgive me . . . perhaps I hadn't quite understood. But do please tell me in what way he was lacking in respect."

"I tell you, he was disrespectful," she cried with sudden rage, turning toward me a second time, with nostrils quivering and an expression of hardness in her eyes; "that's quite enough. . . . He's a horrible man—send him away, get someone else. . . . I don't want him about the place any more."

"I don't understand," I said; "he's a man who's usually most respectful—serious, in fact. . . . A family man. . . ."

"Yes," she repeated, with a sarcastic shrug of the shoulders, "a family man."

"But now will you please tell me what he did to you?"

We went on disputing like this for a while, I insisting on knowing in what way Antonio had shown lack of respect, and she refusing to provide any explanation but merely repeating her accusation. In the end, after a great deal of furious wrangling, I thought I understood what had happened. In order to dress her hair, it had been necessary for Antonio to stand very close to the armchair in which she was sitting. It had seemed to her that more than once he had tried to brush against her shoulder and her arm with his body. I say it *seemed* to her; for she herself admitted that the barber had continued his work imperturbably, remaining all the time silent and respectful. But these contacts, she swore, were not fortuitous; she had observed that they had an intention, a purpose behind them. She was sure that Antonio had intended, by means of these contacts, to establish a relationship with her, to make her an improper proposal.

"But are you quite sure?" I asked at last, astonished.

"How could I *not* be sure? Oh, Silvio, how can you doubt what I say?"

"But it might have been just an impression."

"Impression?—nonsense. . . . Besides, it's enough just to look at him. He's sinister, that man . . . completely bald, and with that neck and those eyes that always look up at you from under his eyelids and never straight in the face. . . . That man's baldness is outrageous. . . . Don't you see what I mean? Are you blind?"

"It might have been an accident. . . . A barber's work forces him to come very close to his client."

"No, it wasn't an accident. . . . *Once* might perhaps have been an accident, but several times, all the time—no, it wasn't an accident."

"Let's see," I said, and I cannot deny that I felt some amusement in carrying out this species of inquest. "You sit down on this chair. . . . I'll be Antonio. Now let's see."

She was boiling over with impatience and anger; but she obeyed, though with a bad grace, and sat down on the chair. I took up a pencil, pretending it was the curling-iron and leaned over as though to curl her hair. And in fact, in that position, just as I had imagined, the lower part of my stomach was exactly at the level of her arm and shoulder and I could not help brushing against her.

"Look," I said, "it's just as I thought. . . . He couldn't help touching you. If anything, then, it was you who ought to have drawn away a little to the other side."

"That's just what I did; but then he went round to the other side."

"Perhaps he had to do that in order to do your hair on that side."

"But, Silvio—is it possible you can be so blind, so stupid? One would say you were doing it on purpose. . . . I tell you, there was a deliberate intention in those contacts."

A question was on my lips, but I hesitated to ask it. Finally I said: "There's contact and contact. . . . Did it seem to you that while he was touching you he was—how shall I say?—excited?"

She was sitting huddled in the armchair, a finger between her teeth, with an expression of strange perplexity on her still angry face. "Certainly," she answered, shrugging her shoulders.

I was afraid I had not understood properly, or had not made myself clear. "In fact," I insisted, "it was obvious that he was excited?"

"Well, yes."

I now realized that I was perhaps even more astonished by my wife's behavior than by Antonio's. She was no longer a girl, but a woman of considerable experience; besides, I was not ignorant that, with regard to things of this kind, she had always had a sort of gay cynicism. All that I knew of her led me to think that she would not have made any fuss over this incident; or, at most, that she would have told me about it in a detached, ironical way. Instead of which, all this rage and hatred! I said, perplexed: "But look, all this still doesn't mean anything. . . . Anybody might get excited by a certain type without wanting to, in fact not wanting to at all. . . . It's happened to me sometimes in a crowd or in a tram, that I found myself wedged against some woman and got excited without meaning to. . . . The spirit is willing," I added jokingly, intending to calm her down, "but the flesh is weak. . . . Why, good heavens . . ."

She said nothing. She appeared to be thinking deeply, biting the tip of her finger and looking toward the window. I thought she had calmed down and I went on, still in a joking manner: "Even saints have their temptations, so what about barbers! . . . Poor Antonio, when he least expected it, made the unwilling discovery that you're a very beautiful and very desirable woman. Being close to you, he wasn't able to control himself . . . probably it was just as disagreeable for him as for you—and that's all there is to it."

She was still silent. I concluded, cheerfully: "When all's said and done I think you ought to make light of this incident. It wasn't so much lack of respect as a kind of homage—a bit coarse and countrified, I agree, but—well, fashions vary, you know."

Carried away by the usual bold gaiety that came over me after my work, I was becoming, as can be seen, deplorably facetious. I realized this just in time and, forcing myself to be serious again, I added hastily: "Forgive me, I know I'm being vulgar—but to tell you the truth I cannot manage to take this whole business seriously . . . all the more so because I'm sure Antonio is innocent."

She spoke at last. "None of this interests me," she said. "What I want to know is whether you're prepared to send him away—that's all."

I have already observed that happiness makes us selfish. At that moment, probably, my selfishness reached its highest point. For I knew that there was no other barber in the village. I knew, besides, that it would be impossible to find one in the town who would be willing to travel several miles every day in order to come and shave me. It would mean giving up the idea of a barber altogether and shaving myself. But, since I don't really know how to shave myself, it would have led to skin inflammations, scratches, cuts and, in fact, all sorts of unpleasantnesses. Instead of this, I wanted everything to go on undisturbed and unchanged as long as I was working, I wanted nothing to come and upset the state of profound quietness which, rightly or wrongly, I considered to be absolutely indispensable if my work were to go well. I forced myself, all at once, to be very serious and said: "But, my dear, you haven't succeeded in convincing me that Antonio was really lacking in respect toward you—I mean intentionally. . . . Why should I sack him? For what reason? What excuse could I make?"

"Any excuse. . . . Tell him we're leaving."

"It isn't true . . . and he would find out at once."

"What does that matter to me?—provided I don't see him again."

"But it's not possible. . . ."

"You won't even do this to oblige me," she cried, exasperated.

"But, my dear, think for a moment. . . . Why should I give gratuitous offense to a poor man who . . . ?"

"Poor man, indeed! He's an outrageous, horrible, sinister man."

"Besides, what am I to do about shaving? You know perfectly well that there are no barbers within fifteen miles of this house."

"Shave yourself, then."

"But I can't shave myself."

"What sort of a man are you, if you can't even shave yourself?"

"No, I *can't* shave myself—so what am I to do?"

"Grow a beard, then."

"Please, for goodness' sake! I shouldn't be able to sleep a wink."

She was silent for a time, and then, in a voice in which there seemed to be an echo of despair, she cried: "Well then, you refuse to do what I ask you—you refuse to do it."

"But, Leda . . ."

"Yes, you refuse to do it . . . and you want to force me to see that horrible, disgusting man again . . . you want to force me to come in contact with him."

"But I don't want to force you to do anything. You needn't appear. . . . You can stay in your own room. . . ."

"So I've got to hide myself in my own house, because you won't do this to oblige me."

"But, Leda . . ."

"Leave me alone." I had moved close beside her, and I was trying to take her hand. "Leave me alone. . . . I want you to send him away, do you understand?"

I decided that I must at last take up an attitude of firmness. "Listen, Leda," I said, "please don't go on like this. This is just an idle caprice and I don't intend to yield to caprices. . . . Now I shall try and find out whether what you state is true; but only if the truth of your accusations can be proved shall I dismiss this man—not otherwise."

She looked at me for some time and then, without saying a word, got up and left the room.

When I was alone, I spent some time thinking over the incident. I was sincerely convinced that the truth of the matter was as I had said. No doubt Antonio had been excited by the contact with her arm and had been unable to control his excitement. But I was sure that he had done nothing to facilitate or repeat such contacts which, anyway, in the position he was in, were unavoidable. He was, in fact, to be blamed only for having failed to elude his involuntary desire. Such, moreover, is still my conviction, for I consider that certain temptations are all the stronger for being neither premeditated nor courted.

These considerations, made in solitude and in perfect good faith, dissipated the last of my remorse. I knew that, fundamentally, I had acted from selfishness; but this selfishness did not contradict what I held to be true justice. I was convinced of Antonio's innocence; and I therefore felt no scruple about placing my own convenience before what I judged to be a mere caprice on the part of my wife.

A few minutes later I joined Leda at table. She seemed perfectly calm, indeed, she was even serene. When the maid had gone out of the room with the dishes, she said to me: "All right . . . you can go on employing Antonio, but you must arrange things so that I don't see him. . . . If I even meet him on the stairs, I won't answer for myself. . . . You've been warned."

Filled with embarrassment, I pretended not to have heard. She added: "It may be that it's only a caprice . . . but my caprices ought to be more important to you than your own convenience, don't you think?"

It was just exactly the opposite of what I myself had decided; and I could not help making a mental note of it. At that moment, the maid came in again and the conversation was dropped. Later, during our walk, I tried to resume it: I was feeling remorse again and I wanted her to be convinced of my reasons. But this time, to my surprise, she said gently: "Don't let's talk about it any more, Silvio, if you don't mind. This morning it seemed to matter a lot to me, I don't myself know why; but now, after having thought it over, I see that I was exaggerating. . . . I can assure you now that it no longer matters to me in the least. . . ."

She appeared sincere, and almost sorry for her anger of the morning. "Are you quite sure?" I insisted.

"Yes, I swear," she said warmly. "What reason could I have for lying about it?"

I was silent; and we continued our walk talking of other things. And so I was convinced that my wife had really dismissed the subject from her mind.

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TODAY, in relating the incident of Antonio, I cannot but portray it in the perspective of events that occurred before and after it. The same thing, I imagine, happens when one writes history. But, just as events, in reality extremely important, pass almost unnoticed by their contemporaries; just as very few of the spectators and the actors realized that the French Revolution was the French Revolution; so the Antonio episode did not strike my imagination at all forcibly—much less so, in fact, than these notes might lead one to suppose. I was really not prepared to attach importance to an incident of that kind: my relations with my wife had hitherto been rational and happy; and nobody would expect to find a medieval trap door in the middle of a bright modern room. I must insist on this quality of innocence in my mind at that moment: it partly excuses my selfishness and explains my superficiality. In fact, whatever the reasons were, I was neither willing nor able, on that occasion, to think evil. So much so, that next day, when Antonio knocked at my study door at the usual time, I realized that I felt neither resentment nor agitation. In the state of extreme objective mental detachment in which I found myself, it seemed almost a pleasure to study the man in the new light that my wife's accusations had thrown upon him. In the first place, while he was shaving me and while I, as usual, was talking to him (and it was no effort to me to talk to him), I observed him closely. He was carefully intent, as always, upon his work and, as always, was doing his job lightly and skillfully. I thought to myself that, if my wife's accusations were true, it meant that he was exceptionally clever at dissimulation, so absorbed and so placid did that broad, rather plump face of his, with its cold yellowish-brown color, appear to be. There still echoed in my ears those words of my wife's: "He's an outrageous, horrible, sinister man" —but after examining him with extreme care, I was forced to conclude that there was nothing outrageous, horrible, or sinister about him. If anything, he had rather a fatherly appearance, the appearance of a man accustomed to looking after five small children, an appearance of purely physical, unconscious authority. Another thought came into my mind as I looked at him, and though I recognized in a confused way that it was a foolish thought, I immediately seized upon it as upon an irrefutable argument: so ugly a man—unless he was mad, which Antonio certainly was not—could not hope to have any success with women, least of all with a woman like my wife, who was so beautiful and of a class so different from his. Not without satisfaction, I noted that he really was fat in the face, and with an unattractive kind of fatness which did not give an impression of good health—rather greasy, smooth and a little flabby, and with an unwholesomely swollen appearance between jaw and neck which reminded one of the similar swelling that is to be seen in certain tropical snakes at moments of anger. He had large ears, with flat, pendulous lobes; and his bald head, burned by the summer sun, was brown in patches. Antonio was evidently a very hairy man: tufts of hair sprouted from his ears and from his nostrils, and even his cheekbones and the tip of his nose were hairy. After examining this ugliness for a long time with complacent minuteness, I chose a moment when Antonio had turned away to wipe his razor on a piece of paper, to say, in a careless tone: "I've always wondered, Antonio, whether a man like you, married and with five children, can find the time and the opportunity to carry on with women."

He answered without smiling, turning back toward me with his razor: "For that particular thing, Signor Baldeschi, time can always be found."

I confess I had expected a different reply and I was considerably surprised. I objected: "But isn't your wife jealous?"

"All wives are jealous."

"So you're unfaithful to her?"

He lifted the razor and looking me in the face, said: "Excuse me, Signor Baldeschi, but that is my business."

I felt myself blushing. I had put that indiscreet question to him because I thought, rather stupidly, that I had the right to do so as a superior to an inferior; but he had put me in my place as an equal to an equal, and this I had not expected. I had a feeling of irritation and was almost tempted to answer: "It's not only your business but mine too, since you've had the impudence to annoy my wife." But I controlled this impulse and said rather confusedly: "You mustn't be offended, Antonio. . . . I didn't mean anything."

"Of course not," he said; and then, applying the razor to my cheek and slowly shaving me, he added, as though he wanted to mitigate the sharpness of his first remark and soothe my mortification: "Why, Signor Baldeschi, everybody likes women. . . . Even the priest over there at San Lorenzo has a woman, and that woman has presented him with two children. If you could look inside people's heads you'd see that everyone's got some woman or other . . . but no one wants to talk about them, because if you do, it gets known and then people start gossiping. . . . And women, as you know, only trust the ones who don't talk."

Thus he read me a lesson on the importance of secrecy in love affairs, leaving me in doubt, however, as to whether he belonged to the category of men who do not talk and who are trusted by women. I said nothing more about it that morning, but changed the conversation. But the suspicion had crept into my mind that, after all, my wife's accusations might have some foundation. In the afternoon, as happened regularly once a week, the farmer's eldest son, Angelo, came to go over the accounts with me. I shut myself up with him in the study and, after examining the account, brought the conversation round to Antonio, asking him if he knew him and what he thought of him. Angelo, a young peasant with fair hair and an expression that combined cunning with foolishness, answered with a slightly malevolent smile: "Yes, yes, we know him, we know him all right."

"It seems to me," I inquired, "—or am I mistaken? —that you don't much care for Antonio."

After a moment's hesitation, he said: "As a barber—there's no doubt he's a good barber. . . ."

"But . . ."

"But he's a stranger here," continued Angelo, "and strangers have different ways, as everybody knows. . . . Perhaps things are different, where he comes from. . . . Certainly no one in these parts can abide him."

"Why?"

"Well—so many things. . . ." And Angelo smiled again, shaking his head. It was a self-conscious, knowing smile and yet full of dislike for Antonio, as though the fault that the local people found with the barber was something that had a funny side to it.

"What sort of things, for instance?" I asked.

I saw him grow serious; and then he answered, stressing his words in a slightly unctuous way: "Well, you see, Signor Baldeschi, in the first place he's always annoying women. . . ."

"Really?"

"Ugh—and *how*! . . . you've no idea. . . . Pretty or ugly, old or young, anything does for him. . . . And not only in his shop, where they go to get their hair curled—but outside it too, ask anyone you like. . . . On Sundays he takes his bike and goes prowling round the countryside—as you might go out shooting . . . it's disgusting. But I tell you, one of these days he's going to find someone who'll put a stop to his tricks. . . ." Having now overstepped the limit of his usual reserve, Angelo had become loquacious, adopting a sort of moralizing tone, heavy and flattering, typical of a peasant who speaks more or less as he imagines his landlord likes him to speak.

"What about his wife?" I asked, interrupting him.

"His poor wife, what can she do? She cries and gets all worked up. . . . He's taught her to shave his clients and every now and then he leaves her in charge of the shop and gets out his bike and tells her he's going into the town . . . but instead of that he goes round looking for a girl. Why, last year . . ."

I decided that Angelo had now given me all the information I needed; there was nothing more to be expected from him except more gossip about Antonio's shocking behavior, and it seemed to me hardly dignified to drag it out of him and listen to it. And so I changed the conversation and soon afterward sent him away.

When I was alone, I fell into a kind of thoughtful abstraction. So my wife had been right, or at least there was a strong probability that she had been right. This Antonio was a libertine, and it was even possible that he had actually tried to seduce my wife. I realized now that the mystery of Antonio—who did not seem to care much about his work, nor to be excessively fond of his family, nor interested in politics—did not exist. There was no mystery, and that was the whole mystery. Antonio was a commonplace Casanova, an ordinary fornicator. And those discreet, oily manners of his were the manners of a man who, as he himself had expressed it, was loved by women because he did not talk.

I had a strange feeling, almost of disappointment. At heart, and almost without realizing it, I had hoped that Antonio would not be so quickly and so easily deflated. I had liked Antonio, I now saw, just because there was in him—or so it had seemed to me—something mysterious. The mystery having been dispersed, nothing remained but a poor fellow who went about annoying women, *all* women, including, perhaps, women like my wife who were utterly out of his reach. There was something that irritated me in this discovery of the secret mainspring of the barber's life. Previously, if I had allowed myself to be infected by Leda's resentment, I might have hated him. Now that I knew all about him, however, I seemed to feel nothing except pity mingled with contempt—a feeling which was humiliating not only for him but for me also, since I now saw myself suddenly degraded to a mortifying rivalry with a village Don Juan.

And yet, strange to say, there persisted in me the conviction that he had not really dared to raise his eyes toward my wife; and that, as I had at first supposed, he had been led against his will to make his admiration clear to her in his own way. The fact that he was a libertine did not seem to me to destroy this supposition; it appeared, rather, to explain the facility with which he had become excited at the first chance contact—a facility easily understandable in an adolescent whose senses are always ready to trip him up, but unlikely in an experienced man of forty whose ardors may be supposed to have cooled. Only a libertine, accustomed to cultivate certain instincts to the exclusion of all others, could have a sensibility so prompt and so irresistible.

I went so far as to admit that, all things considered, he had not been altogether displeased at finding himself in that embarrassing situation and that he had at the same time both encouraged and fought against it. But there seemed to me to be no doubt at all that, in the first instance, it had been not deliberate but accidental.

It is possible that this inclination on my part to consider Antonio as being initially innocent (and I still consider him to be so), may have derived, partly at any rate, from my own selfishness, that is, from my fear of having to give him the sack and shave myself. But even if this was true, I was certainly not aware of it. I thought over the whole affair with extreme objectivity; and often there is nothing like objectivity—that is, the forgetting of the links that connect objects and subjective motives—to encourage self-deception. To my conviction of Antonio's innocence, and to the feeling of contemptuous pity that I now had for him, must be added my wife's exaggerated reaction, which, if I had even imagined that I could be jealous, destroyed from the very first moment every reason for jealousy. In any case I am not of a jealous nature—at least, I do not think so. In me every passion is finally dissolved in the acid of reflection—a method as good as any other for subduing passion by destroying, at the same time, both its tyrannical power and the suffering it brings.

After my conversation with Angelo, I went as usual for a walk with my wife. It was then for the first time that I genuinely felt I was deceiving her. I felt I ought to tell her all I had learned about Antonio; but I didn't want to because I was aware that to do so would be, as it were, to rekindle in her, more strongly than ever, the first flame of anger that seemed now to be spent. Uncertain and filled with remorse, I at last said to her, at a moment when she appeared rather absent-minded: "Perhaps you're still thinking about Antonio's lack of respect? . . . If you really want me to, I'll get rid of him."

I think that, if she had asked it of me, this time I should have satisfied her. In effect, my selfishness had received a shock; and I only needed a little encouragement to give her what she wanted. I saw her give a start: ". . . Thinking about the barber? . . . no, no, not at all. . . . To tell the truth I had really forgotten all about him."

"But if you want me to, I'll get rid of him," I insisted, encouraged by this indifference of hers that seemed to be quite sincere, and with the feeling of making a proposal that could not fail to be rejected.

"But I don't want you to," she said. "It doesn't matter to me in the least. . . . Really, as far as I'm concerned, it's just as if nothing had happened at all."

"You see, I was thinking . . ."

"It's a thing that concerns you and only you," she concluded with a thoughtful air, "for the reason that it's only you, now, who can be vexed, or not vexed, by his presence here. . . ."

"To tell the truth, it doesn't worry *me*."

"Well then, why should you get rid of him?"

I was pleased at this reasonableness on her part, although I was again conscious of a vague sort of disappointment. But it was my fate, at that period, that the happiness of a creative instinct at last satisfied should have made me fail to analyze carefully any of the feelings which, one after the other, manifested themselves in me. Next day Antonio came again and I noticed with astonishment that that curious charm of his, far from being dispelled by Angelo's information, still remained intact. In fact, the mystery of which I had been aware before I knew anything about him subsisted even now that I thought I knew everything. This mystery had been thrust back into a less accessible region, that was all. I found myself thinking that it was rather like the mystery of all other things, both great and small: everything about them can be explained except their existence.

9

DURING THE DAYS that followed I went on working with an impetus and a facility that appeared to increase steadily the nearer I approached the end of my task. Antonio continued to come every morning, and I, when that first embarrassment was over, regarded him again with unimpaired curiosity. I felt that there was now a bond between him and me; I might have severed this bond at the very beginning if I had dismissed him as my wife had suggested; but I had not done this, and a new relationship, tacit but recognizable, had resulted. I find it difficult to explain the feeling that this relationship gave me. At first there had been, between me and Antonio, the usual relationship that exists between superior and inferior. After my wife's accusation this relationship had been modified: the superior was also the husband whose honor was assailed or who might believe his honor to be assailed, the inferior was also the assailant, or might believe himself to be the assailant. But these two relationships were in fact purely conventional, founded as they were, the first on the fictitious state of dependence and authority conferred by the giving and taking of a wage, the second on the no less fictitious moral obligation imposed by the matrimonial tie. In suggesting that I should replace Antonio, my wife had really suggested that I should accept these two conventions without taking into account the particular, effective factors in the case. I had rejected her suggestion, and Antonio had not been replaced. Now I felt that, as a consequence of my refusal, there had grown up between him and me a new relationship that was certainly much more real because it was founded upon the situation as it was and not as it ought to have been; only this relationship could be neither classified nor defined, and it made possible any consequences. I knew that, having refused to behave as anyone else in my place would have behaved —that is, as a superior and as a husband—I had opened the way to all sorts of possibilities, since everything now depended upon the developments in the real situation, independent of convention, in which we found ourselves. I saw that, in substance, the attitude suggested to me by my wife, conventional as it was, was the only tenable attitude if one wanted the situation to retain a recognizable external appearance. Outside this attitude anything was possible, and everything dissolved and fell to pieces. This attitude allowed each of us to keep to a well-known, pre-established role; outside this attitude our identities became blurred, misty, interchangeable.

These reflections made me understand the usefulness of moral standards and social conventions, which are, of course, external, but are indispensable for checking natural disorder and bringing it to order. And yet, on the other hand, I saw that, once moral standards and social conventions have been rejected, this same disorder must perforce tend to come to a standstill and systematize itself upon a foundation of sheer necessity. In other words, apart from the solution proposed by my wife, there remained one other solution which would be dictated by the actual nature of the circumstances. It was rather like a river which is either confined between artificial embankments or is allowed to spread out according to the slope and the accidents of the ground: in both cases, though by different methods and with different effects, it will form a bed of its own by which it may run away to the sea. But this second solution, the most natural and the most fateful, was still unlikely to come about, and, as it seemed to me, would perhaps never come about at all. Antonio would continue to come and shave me, I would finish my work and, later on, my wife and I would go away, and I would never know how much truth there had been in my wife's accusations. I can now set forth these reflections of mine in an orderly and lucid fashion. But, at the time, they were not so much reflections as vague feelings, and it was as though they proceeded from an indisposition caused by consciousness, which had taken the place of my previous agreeable unconsciousness.

It may perhaps seem surprising that I should have thought, or rather felt, in this way at the very moment when the thing was going on and was developing under my very eyes, and when my most precious affections were, or might seem to me to be, threatened. But I wish to repeat what I have already said more than once: I was absorbed in creative activity (or thought I was) and everything else was indifferent to me. Of course I had not ceased to love my wife and to have a natural sense of my own honor; but artistic creation, by a strange miracle, had removed the heavy stamp of urgency from these things and had transferred it to the pages of the book that I was engaged in writing. If my wife, instead of accusing Antonio of being disrespectful to her, had revealed to me that she had seen him wiping his razor on one of the pages of my story, I certainly should not have speculated upon his ignorance or his irresponsibility; I should have dismissed him at once. And yet such a fault was certainly more understandable, more justifiable, more pardonable than the fault that had been imputed to him. What was it that made me indifferent to what he had done in relation to my wife and, on the other hand, made me react so violently to the possibility of his spoiling my work? This was where the mystery came in of which I had been aware in him from the beginning, the mystery that Angelo's revelations had quite failed to dispel and which lay, in truth, more in myself than in him. It was a mystery, when all is said and done, that is created and always will be created every time one leaves the surface of things and descends into the depths.

As for my wife, she no longer came and joined me while Antonio was shaving me, and I suppose that until the barber had left the house she remained shut up in her own room. In the end this attitude of hers annoyed me because it showed that she was clinging to her first conventional reaction and had no intention of exchanging it for an approach such as mine; rational, speculative. I asked her—I do not remember how, or on what occasion—why she never appeared now during the morning. She answered me directly, without any irritation but with just a touch of impatience: "But, Silvio . . . really sometimes I almost doubt your intelligence . . . how could I possibly appear? That man hasn't been punished for his insolence. . . . If I appeared he might think I had forgiven him—or worse. . . . By not appearing I allow him to think that I preferred to avoid a scandal and so didn't tell you."

I don't know what demon of subtlety prompted me to reply: "He may also have thought that you didn't notice. . . . And this makes it worse; you're allowing him to think that you did notice and that, in spite of that, you're not doing anything about it or making me do anything."

"The only possible thing," she answered calmly, "would have been to give him the sack that same day."

10

AT LAST the morning came when I wrote the last word at the end of the last line of the last page, and closed the exercise book that contained my story. It seemed to me that I had made an enormous effort and that I had been working for an infinite time: in truth I had jotted down the equivalent of about a hundred printed pages and had worked for little more than twenty days or so. With my exercise book in my hand I went over to the window and mechanically turned over its pages. Tears came into my eyes, whether from joy or from exhaustion at the end of my labors, I did not know. I could not help thinking that in that bundle of sheets was harvested the finest product of my life, everything, in fact, that from then on would make life seem worth while, for the past as well as for the future. I turned the pages slowly, and as I gazed at them I became aware that my sight was growing dim and I felt the tears falling upon my hands. Then I saw Antonio crossing the gravel sweep on his bicycle, and hastily I put the exercise book on the desk and wiped my eyes.

Later, after Antonio had left, I went into my bedroom and while dressing I started as usual to think about the work I had done. On other days I used to think merely of the pages I had written that same morning, but this day, for the first time, I gloated over the whole story, caressing it in my memory from beginning to end. There in front of me was what I privately called my masterpiece, complete and perfect, and I was at last able to enjoy it in its entirety, like enjoying a panoramic view after a long and wearisome climb during which one has been able to catch only partial glimpses of it. But these things can only be suggested, not described. All I can say is that while I was thinking about my story, time seemed to be suspended in a sort of ravishment—indeed, it was. Suddenly the door opened and my wife appeared on the threshold: "What on earth are you doing?" she said. "Lunch is ready . . . it's been ready for three quarters of an hour."

I was sitting on the bed in my dressing gown, and my clothes were still lying on the chair where I had placed them the night before. I looked at my wristwatch: Antonio had left at about a quarter to one, and now it was two o'clock. I had spent a whole hour and a quarter sitting on the bed with one sock on and the other in my hand. "I'm sorry," I said, with a violent start of surprise, "I don't know what can have happened to me . . . I'll come at once." I dressed hurriedly and joined her downstairs.

In the afternoon, when that first enthusiasm had subsided, questions took shape in my mind. I had decided to read the story to my wife as soon as I had finished it. I trusted her more than I trusted myself, more than I trusted any critic whatsoever. As I have already said, she was not a cultivated woman, she had no knowledge of literary matters, and her interest in books was the interest of an ordinary person who pays more attention to facts than to style. But, just for these reasons, just because I knew that her judgment would be more or less that of the ignorant public, I trusted her. I knew her to be lively, sufficiently intelligent, full of good sense and in the long run incapable of being taken in, though for different reasons from those of a professional man of letters. Her judgment, I was aware, would not perhaps be competent to give me an idea of the strictly literary value of the story, but would certainly enable me to understand whether the book was alive or not. And after all, in the case of any book, the first question to be considered should be that of its vitality as a whole. There are books that are imperfect, badly constructed, jumbled, untidy and yet alive, which we read and shall always read; and there are books that are perfect in every detail, well planned, well composed, tidy and polished and yet dead, which, with all their perfection, not knowing what to make of it, we reject utterly. This was a conviction I had reached after many years of reading and of practice in criticism. And so, in the first place, I had to know whether my book was alive; and nobody would be better able to assure me of this than my wife.

I ought to say that I prepared myself for this trial —which I considered to be of supreme importance— with complete tranquillity of mind. I still had many doubts about the literary qualities of my story, not having re-read it and having, also, the impression that I had written it in rather a hurry. But with regard to its vitality it seemed to me that there could be no doubts. Had not all those discouraging feelings of sterility, of strain, of inadequacy, of bungling, of sophistry, which had tormented me all my life and had always, in the end, brought me to a standstill whenever I had tried to write—had not all these gradually fallen away, the further I progressed in my composition? Had I not been conscious, as I wrote, that a kind of dam had burst in my breast, and that all that it had been holding back had escaped, not to run away quietly like a brook but forcing its way out and swelling like a flood? Had I not, indeed, felt all the time that my essential self was faithfully reflected in what I was writing, as was all that I wrote in my essential self? Other and similar arguments had by now brought me to face with serenity any effects that the reading of my story might have upon my wife.

There were still one or two practical difficulties. The manuscript, though not inextricably confused, contained a number of crossed-out words and additions between the lines which would make reading it muddled and confusing. I might have to stop at certain points and go back in order to pick up the lost thread of the meaning, thus breaking a charm that I wished to be uninterrupted and complete. And in the hurry of this first draft, certain details, certain finishing touches might have been forgotten. While on a walk with Leda, talking of indifferent matters, I debated the pros and cons of reading the story to her that same afternoon. I decided finally to put off the reading for about ten days, during which time I would type out the manuscript. I knew that as I copied it many things that might be wrong would come right, and many others that might be lacking altogether could be added. The style would thus be consolidated and all raggedness would be eliminated. Besides—and this was a decisive argument—I would be able, for another ten days, to enjoy my masterpiece in unpublished intimacy. This last reason finally convinced me.

I had brought my typewriter with me from Rome; it was a new one, or nearly so, for I had used it only for writing business letters and an occasional article. It was an American machine, the best and most up-to-date kind that could be found, and its high qualities, during my periods of sterility, had sometimes filled me with bitterness. I was, it seemed to me, merely one of those wealthy, incompetent writers who possess everything needed for the writing of a masterpiece—money, time, a comfortable, quiet study, paper of the finest quality, fountain pens of the best make, the last word in typewriters—everything except genius. Such a man comes to envy the cheap notebook in which some starving youth scribbles a few lines in pencil, as the fleeting inspiration moves him, sitting in the corner of a café or a popular eating house. Now, however, the bitter sense of sterility aroused in me by my beautiful typewriter and all the other conveniences at my disposal had disappeared. I had wealth, I had leisure—but I had created; expensive paper, a study, a library, a typewriter were all mine—but I had created. Such superstitions, I believe, fill the lives of men who create—or who think they create.

But when I went that same afternoon to examine my typewriter and see that all was in order, I discovered I had left my typewriting paper behind in Rome. I knew that there was no question of being able to find this sort of paper in the village so I decided to go and buy some in the town. There was a stationer's shop there that supplied all the offices of the neighborhood. It was impossible for me to go there that day, however, since the farmer's one-horse trap, my only available means of transport, had already gone out in the morning. I planned to go next day. That same evening I announced my intended expedition to my wife, telling her that I had to go into the town for some shopping but not specifying what it was I meant to buy; and, as a matter of form, I suggested that she should accompany me. I say "as a matter of form" because I knew that there was not much room in the trap and that she did not care for that slow and uncomfortable vehicle. In any case I was not sorry that she should not come: I was so happy that solitude seemed to me preferable to company. As I had foreseen, she refused, without even the slightest comment upon the purpose of my expedition. She asked, after a moment: "What time will you be back?"

"Quite soon . . . at any rate for lunch."

She was silent, and then went on, in a casual way: "What's to be done if the barber comes?"

I thought for a moment, and then answered: "I shall certainly be back before he comes. . . . If by any chance I'm late, ask him to wait." This reply was dictated by my dislike of having to make use of one of the barbers in the town, and of their razors which were used on other customers. Antonio brought with him nothing at all; all the required implements were supplied by me.

She said nothing, and we changed the conversation. Now that my work was finished I felt my love for my wife coming back as strong as before, and even stronger. Or rather, I had loved her all the time, but, during those twenty days of work, I had suspended the expression of my love. We were sitting at table, in the little dining room. Leda, as usual, was in evening dress, in a graceful white gown with long, flowing lines, low at the back and, with its simple draperies, rather like a Greek *peplum.* Around her neck, upon her fingers, and in the lobes of her ears were her jewels, all of them massive and of great value. The parchment-shaded lamp in the middle of the table lit up her features with a soft, golden light. Her face was expertly made up; and she had retained the short, curly *coiffure* that Antonio had devised for her. I noticed for the first time that her long, thin face, now that it had ceased to be enclosed between loose, trailing locks of hair, had assumed a quite different aspect from the one I was accustomed to: it appeared younger, less wistful, and had about it a look of cruel, archaic sensuality. No longer softened and caressed by the waving hair, the strained, unmoving slant of her enormous blue eyes, the sharp sensitiveness of her nostrils, the smiling bigness of her mouth—all were fully revealed. She seemed to have been stripped of something and therefore to be more real, with an antique, satyr-like appearance which reminded one at the same time of primitive Greek sculptures with set expressions of ironical ambiguity upon their brows, and of a goat's Semitic profile. To emphasize this appearance my wife, as on the day of the Antonio incident, had fastened above her left temple, on the gold of her hair, a bunch of fresh, red flowers. Looking at her, I said: "You know, after all, your hair as Antonio arranged it really suits you very well. . . . I've only just noticed it."

She seemed to give an almost imperceptible start at the name of the barber and lowered her eyes. With her long fingers she was twisting the massive crystal stopper of a decanter, and between her pointed nails, red as rubies, the faceted stopper looked, in the lamplight, like an enormous diamond shot through with gleaming lights. She said slowly: "The idea of doing my hair like this wasn't Antonio's, it was mine. . . . All he did was to do what I told him—and badly, too."

"And how did you come to think of it?"

"I used to wear it like this when I was a girl, very many years ago," she said. "It's an arrangement that suits either very young women, or"—and she smiled slightly—"middle-aged ones, like me."

"What do you mean, middle-aged? Don't say such silly things. . . . And those flowers suit you perfectly. . . ."

The maid came in and we helped ourselves in silence. When she had left the room again, I put down my knife and fork and said: "You look like a different person, or rather, you're yourself all the time, but with a new appearance." All at once I felt deeply disturbed, and I added in a whisper: "You're very beautiful, Leda . . . it may be I forget that every now and then . . . but the moment always comes when I realize how utterly in love with you I am."

She went on eating and did not reply; but there was no sign of disdain, in fact a certain satisfaction was visible in the faint quiver of her nostrils and the droop of her lowered eyelids. It was her way of accepting compliments that were agreeable to her and I knew it. All at once there came over me an indescribable turmoil of love. I put my hand on hers and murmured: "Give me a kiss."

She raised her eyes, looked at me, and asked, with simplicity and perhaps without any intended irony: "Is your work finished, then?"

"No," I lied, "but I can't look at you without loving you and without wanting to kiss you. . . . To hell with my work."

As I said this I pulled her by the arm so that she leaned over in my direction. She resisted, frowning, with an air half serious, half tempted, and said in a voice full of love: "You're crazy"; then turning suddenly gave me the kiss I had asked for, abruptly, impetuously, but with sincerity. We kissed in breathless haste, crushing our lips violently against each other's; it was like the kiss of two simple but ardent youngsters who are not yet expert in love and who spoil their own enjoyment by nervousness and impatience. And I, in that fleeting kiss—which I seemed to be snatching rather than merely receiving from my wife's lips—felt that I had in truth gone back to my boyhood and that I was in danger of being surprised by a stern mother instead of a devoted old servant who would be both embarrassed and sympathetic. Immediately after the kiss we became composed again, just like two children; she serene and quiet, I a little out of breath. But the maid did not come; and I looked at my wife and then I managed to laugh, both at myself and at her, and I laughed and slapped her hand. This made her suspicious and she asked: "Why are you laughing?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm not laughing at you. . . . I'm laughing because I'm happy."

With her eyes lowered, and in a calm, conversational tone, as she went on eating, she asked: "And what is it that makes you so happy?"

This time I could resist no longer and I said, ingenuously: "For the first time in my life I have everything I wanted, and what's more—a thing which is much rarer—I know that I have it. . . ."

"What was it you wanted?"

"For years and years," I said, "I've wanted to love a woman and to be loved by her in return. . . . Well, now I love you, and you, I believe, love me. For years and years I've had an ambition to write something lasting, something alive, something poetical. . . . Now that I've finished my story, I can say that I've achieved that too."

I had decided not to speak to my wife about the story until I had finished copying it. But my joy was so great that I couldn't resist it. Her reaction to the news surprised me, although I knew that she loved me and took a lively interest in all that I did. "You've finished?" she exclaimed, with a delight that was flattering because sincere, "you've finished?"—and her voice had a clear ring in it which enchanted me —"Oh, Silvio—and you never told me anything about it!"

"I didn't tell you about it," I exclaimed, "because, although in the strict sense of the word I've finished, I've still got to type out the manuscript. . . . I shan't really have finished till the day when I've finished the typing."

"That doesn't matter," she said, with that same complete and flattering spontaneity, "you've finished and this is a great moment. . . . We must drink to the health of your book."

Her manner was charmingly, impetuously affectionate and her blue eyes, so beautiful and so luminous, rested seductively upon me as though they wanted to caress me. With a hand that trembled slightly I poured some wine into our glasses. Then we raised them high above the table. "To you and to your book," she said in a low voice, looking at me. I drank, and saw her drink, and then she put down her glass and leaned toward me offering her lips; and this time it was a true kiss, long and passionate, and it was only after we had finished kissing that we noticed that the maid had come in and was looking at us, leaning against the sideboard with the tray in her hands.

"Come on, Anna, you must drink too. This is a great day," said my wife with that graceful, authoritative naturalness which enabled her to deal with the most embarrassing social situations. "Silvio, give Anna some wine. Come on, Anna, drink Signor Silvio's health." The old woman demurred, smiling ironically. "Well, well, if it's a health to be drunk . . . " she said; and putting down the tray on the sideboard, she took the glass, raised it with an awkward gesture and drank the toast. My wife, with the same naturalness of manner, then helped herself and started eating again, still continuing to question me, in a simple way, about my work. "And this time," she asked, "are you really certain that you've done something good?"

"Yes," I answered, "as far as one can be certain with this kind of thing . . . and I can be more certain than many other people might be, because I'm not a bad critic myself—of that, at least, I'm perfectly certain."

"You know, I want to tell you how very pleased I am," she went on after a brief silence, placing her hand on mine and looking into my face. I lifted her hand and kissed it. I was infinitely grateful to my wife for the way in which she had welcomed the news of the finishing of my work, by which she had once again revealed to me, as by an infallible touchstone, the pure gold of the feeling that she cherished toward me. I felt intoxicated by the delight she showed, just as though that welcome had come from the most exacting of critics instead of from an ignorant outsider like herself. It was a callow feeling, but I believe that all writers, even the most sophisticated, experience it at least once in their lives, at the beginning of their careers, at a time when they are timid but hopeful candidates for the opinion of some more important, older colleague. Uplifted by this joyful atmosphere, I discovered that without my being aware of it we had finished our meal, had risen from the table, had walked into the drawing room, and that my wife was standing in front of me pouring out the coffee.

I do not remember clearly the details of what happened that night, just as one does not remember people's faces and expressions when a sudden flash of lightning dazzles everybody with its blinding glare. I only remember that I was excited, hilarious, in a state of exaltation and that I talked about my future and hers. Then I explained how it happened that I had written the story. Taking us two and our marriage as subject, I analyzed the material I had made use of and described to her the changes and the profundities I had introduced into it. I quoted other famous books, making comparisons, tracing precedents, linking up my own work with a tradition. Every now and then I broke off into sidelines of reflection or anecdote. Finally I picked up a book, an anthology which had recently appeared, and read aloud some poems by modern authors. My wife was sitting on the sofa, beautiful, elegant, her legs crossed and one silver-shod foot raised, smoking and listening to me; and I was aware that she was following all that I said with the same affection, truly as unchangeable as gold, that she had displayed to me with such spontaneity when I had announced that I had finished my story. Alone in that nineteenth-century drawing room, among all those pieces of antiquated and creaking furniture, in that isolated villa in the depths of the country, we enjoyed—at least I enjoyed—two hours of incomparable intimacy. And then, exactly at the moment when I was finally closing the anthology, the lights went out.

It was not unusual in that part of the country for the electricity to fail. It was the time of the olive harvest and the current would be diverted to the presses. In the darkness I went over to the French window that gave on to the graveled space in front of the house and threw it wide open. The drive was white in the moonlight, and behind the black trees which framed it the night sky, too, was silvered by the full moon. On the threshold I stood still, searching for the moon itself but unable to find it. Then, all of a sudden, turning, I saw it rising rapidly behind the mountain on whose top stood the ancient town, at first no more than a segment, then, as though pushed up by some irresistible movement, becoming steadily larger and rounder until it hung complete, a solid globe bathed in silver light in a brightened sky. Its rays, falling vertically upon the brown walls of the town, threw them into crumbling relief, imparting to them a quality of coldness and loneliness. They seemed to acquire an air of fearless expectation, of vigilant guardianship, as in the days when they had been built with the true purpose of defending the town; and I forgot myself as I looked at them and as I looked at the moon hanging above them. Then, from the room behind, came the voice of my wife who had remained sitting on the sofa: "Don't you think it's time to go to bed? It must be getting very late, you know."

It was, possibly, a suggestion that we should merely go to our beds and sleep. But I, in my exalted state of mind, took it as a love invitation and turned hastily back into the room, saying: "There's a magnificent moon . . . why shouldn't we go for a little walk?" Without a word my wife obeyed me and came forward out of the darkness of the room, and I was pleased by this docile agreement of hers. We went out together on to the graveled space in front of the house.

The silence was profound, as it is on these autumn nights when all the insects of summer have retreated into silence until the following year. The two plaster dogs that gazed at the villa from the edges of the open space seemed also a part of this silence, lively, almost affectionate in their attitudes, but white and dumb. We started off down the drive, beneath the low vault of trees. While we were in this deep shadow, I put my arm round Leda's waist and felt her lean back against it lazily, gracefully, without trace of sentimentality, as though my gesture had been foreseen and already discounted. Thus linked together, we walked on down the drive, between the two slanting rows of trees whose trunks and foliage were flecked here and there with uncertain gleams of white by the moonlight as it filtered through the tangled undergrowth. We walked the whole length of the drive and, at a short distance from the gate, turned off into another path, between two rows of cypresses. Beyond the cypresses one could catch a glimpse of the wide plain, silent in the moonlight, and, at the top of the path, where there was a silvery emptiness, one could sense a further stretch of open country. My wife was leaning against my arm and I could feel, through her dress, the soft curve of her waist where it joined the roundness of her hip. At the end of the path we turned off along a track that divided the park from the fields. The park came to a natural end here in the open country. The last trees stretched out their boughs across the track to the first rows of vines. A little farther on, on the top of a hill, were the farm buildings whose rustic fronts were brilliantly lit by the moon. The track, still skirting the edge of the park, passed below the farm buildings, rounded a knoll upon which was a threshing floor and three haystacks, and then lost itself in the countryside.

We walked slowly, with the trees of the park on one side and, on the other, the grassy slope of the hill. We passed the buildings and reached a point just below the threshing floor; then I raised my eyes toward the three stacks. One of them was complete, made of fresh straw of a bright, shining yellow; another was brown, the straw older; of the third there remained only a section, shaped like a rudder, against the crooked pole that had supported it. The moonlight, falling upon the three stacks and outlining their masses sharply against the dark, empty background of the open countryside, seemed to isolate them upon their knoll. The way they were placed, which was obviously not by mere chance, and their monumental aspect made one forget their real nature and suggested the idea of some mysterious underlying purpose. I could not help thinking of the circles of enormous upright stones left by the Druids on the plains of France and England. I said to my wife that the three stacks standing there in the brilliant light of the full moon reminded me of the dolmens of Brittany, and I went on to explain something of the pagan rites that were celebrated in those prehistoric temples. For an idea had come to me, or rather a desire—to climb up on to the threshing floor with Leda and make love to her there, on the straw, on the ground, in the moonlight. In that way would I solemnize, in a worthy setting, the end of my work and, at the same time, our return to conjugal love. I do not say that certain literary memories did not enter into this desire; but, after all, I was a literary man, and it was right that literature, in me, should be fused with the deepest and most genuine impulses. In any case, I had a real longing for Leda, and the idea of making love to her in the open air, on a night of full moon, seemed to me absolutely natural just such an idea as might have occurred to a simpler, less cultivated man than myself.

11

I TOLD HER that I wanted to climb up to the threshing floor and look at the wide view to be seen from there; she agreed and, still linked together, we scrambled up the steep slope, over the slippery grass. When we reached the threshing floor we stood still for a moment gazing at the landscape. The whole wide plain stretched away as far as the eye could see in the clear night, and the moonlight, falling upon that vast area of growing things, showed up the rows of fruit trees, the hedges, the empty spaces of the fields, the vineyards. Here and there its brilliance was concentrated upon the front of some farmhouse, bathing it in silver. At the horizon, a row of black mountains made a clear line between earth and the tranquil sky. A far-away murmur, as of a train running hidden among the cultivated fields, passed across the sleeping countryside and emphasized its vastness and its silence.

My wife gazed at this landscape almost in bewilderment, as though she wished to penetrate the secret of its serenity and its silence; and I, putting my arm round her waist again, began talking to her in a low voice, pointing out now one place, now another, in the plain below us, and exalting the beauty of the night. Then, as we still conversed together, I made her turn around toward the mountain that rose behind us and pointed out the walls of the town upon its top. We had moved, as we talked, close to one of the stacks of straw: on the ground there was scattered straw where the farmer's children played in the daytime. Suddenly I embraced her, murmuring: "Leda . . . isn't it better here than in your room?" And as I spoke I tried to push her gently to the ground.

She looked at me, her shining blue eyes dilated by a sudden temptation. Then, resisting me, she said: "No . . . the straw isn't clean. . . . Besides, it's so prickly. . . . I should ruin my frock."

"What does your frock matter?"

"Your work isn't finished yet," she said, with a laugh that was unexpected and full of coquettishness. "The day you've really finished it, we'll come back here, at night. . . . Is that all right?"

"No, it's not all right, there won't be any moon then. . . . Tonight."

Softly, and as though she were still hesitating, she said: "Let me go, Silvio"; and then, abruptly, she freed herself and ran off down the hill, laughing. It was a fresh, childish laugh, full of an affectionate nervousness in which there seemed still to be a tremor of the temptation that I had discerned a moment before in her eyes; and this seemed to recompense me for the way in which it repulsed me. Perhaps it was better that it should have happened like this I thought, as I ran after her: a gentle refusal and a gracious laugh. She was running in front of me along the path between the park and the vineyards, but I caught her easily and took her in my arms. I felt that that laugh had satisfied every desire of mine; and, after kissing her, I started walking along beside her, holding her hand tightly. The moonlight threw our two shadows in front of us—separate, but with the hands joined; and this chaste return of ours appeared to me more truly loving than the embrace which she had evaded at the threshing floor. We walked the length of the drive and reached the front of the house. The electric light had come on again, and the French window of the drawing room had a bright and welcoming look. We went into the house, and straight upstairs. She walked in front of me up the stairs and never had she looked so beautiful to me as in that soft, graceful movement of ascent which showed off the lines of her figure. On the landing she said again, in a characteristically jocular, and at the same time sensual, manner: "Finish your work, then . . . and we'll go together to the threshing floor." I kissed her hand and went to my room. Very soon afterwards I was asleep.

Next morning my feeling of exaltation, far from having evaporated, had reached its highest point. My wife was still asleep when I climbed into Angelo's trap and drove off with him to the town. Angelo perhaps thought it his duty to talk to me of the state of affairs of the countryside; and I let him chatter away without listening to him, being absorbed in my thoughts, or rather in my feelings. The trap started off down the drive, where the first rays of the morning sun were already playing, skirted the old boundary wall and turned into the main road. The air was mild, and the soft splendor of autumn lay upon all things; I looked round over the countryside, already partly despoiled and weary looking, and all about me, in that accurate light, so different from the devouring glare of summer, all things were clearly visible, each thing could be clearly distinguished, even to the finest detail and the subtlest shade of color; and I could not have enough of looking. Here was a red leaf which, at a breath of wind, detached itself from the bough of a vine; there a changing network of light and faint shadow upon an old brown, green and gray wall; farther on a lark, rising from the road almost under the horse's hoofs, punctured space with brief flights and came to rest beside a clod of earth in a bare field, and the clod had been freshly turned and still had upon it the gloss of the spade. There were patches of verdigris, of a poisonous blue, upon the white walls of farm buildings; there was moss, yellow as gold, on the weathered rooftiles of a little church that looked like a barn; there were big, pale green acorns among the darker leaves of a young oak that hung out over the road from the field beside it. I rejoiced in these and other similar minute details as though they had been rich with some ineffable meaning; and I was aware that I owed this new way of looking at things, as though I were in love with them, to my own happiness, which, also, was new and ineffable.

After crossing part of the flat plain, the road attacked the mountain slope, rising gently but unceasingly. The trap proceeded at walking pace. I looked then for the first time at the ancient walls rising sheer on the mountain top, brown but with edges glowing in the sunlight; and all at once I felt myself flooded with an uncontrollable rapture, as though those walls had been the goal, now at last visible, not of my brief morning expedition but of my whole life. The trap climbed slowly, and I, for a moment, as I looked at the walls, saw myself not as I was, a mass of confused and transient thoughts and feelings, but firmly established in time, wearing like a mantle the predestined and mysteriously simple character that history attributes to its heroes. Those great men whom I admired, the bringers of consolation, had moved along just such a road, on a morning like this and beneath this same sun. In this certainty I seemed to find confirmation that I myself would one day become one of these men. I seemed to divine it in the intensity of that moment as I lived it; it seemed to me the clearest possible sign of my entry into greatness and into eternity. I was surprised to find myself murmuring: "The twenty-seventh of October nineteen hundred and thirty-seven," over and over again, in time to the hard, insistent, regular beat of the horse's hoofs as it mounted the hill and I had the feeling that the magic charm of that date, as I pronounced each of its syllables distinctly, held in itself some sort of foreboding.

Our slow progress had brought us finally to the town gate, which consists of enormous masses of Etruscan masonry surmounted by a slender medieval arch. It stood golden in the sunshine; peasants driving donkeys or carrying baskets went through it in front of us: and it was, in fact, a morning just like any other morning, on top of this mountain as elsewhere. After we had passed the gate, my mood of exaltation fell suddenly flat as the trap went up over the cobbles of a steep street, between two rows of old houses. When we reached the main square I got down, asking Angelo to meet me there in an hour's time, and went to look for the paper I needed. The shop I had in mind was farther along the Corso, and I had little difficulty in finding it. But I discovered to my surprise that the stationer kept no typewriting paper, only foolscap. I resigned myself disgustedly to buying a hundred of these double sheets, thinking that I could cut them up and make two sheets out of each. With my roll of paper under my arm I went into the principal café and drank a vermouth, standing at the bar. It was an old-fashioned café, dark and dusty, with a few bottles of dubious aspect upon the shelves behind the bar, and no customers on the red divans round the walls. I left the café, returned to the square, went over to the newspaper kiosk and, after examining at length the four or five illustrated magazines and comic papers hung up there, I bought the morning paper and sat down on the stone seat in front of the town hall, beneath the convoluted coats-of-arms of extinct noble families and the iron rings for tying up horses. I was sorry now that I had told Angelo to come back in an hour's time, but consoled myself with the thought that he had things to do and that I should have had to wait for him anyhow. The irregular piazza, narrow, surrounded by medieval palaces, half in sunshine and half in shadow, was deserted, since it was not market day: during the space of an hour and more that I remained there I cannot have seen more than ten people or so go past, of whom at least half were priests. I read the newspaper through and realized that I was not in the least disturbed at having to wait, since my work was so satisfactorily finished and I should not in any case have started the typing that morning. I felt calm and in a perfectly normal state of mind, and when I finished the paper I watched the numerous tradesmen who were at work in their shops around the square. Meanwhile the sun was climbing higher and the shadow of the town hall, with its severe outline, grew less as it retreated across the cobblestones. From somewhere or other a bell—a convent bell, perhaps—began to ring violently; and this was at once followed by the graver tones of the bells in the tower of the principal church. It was noon; the whole town seemed to reawake, and groups of people came into the piazza. I, too, moved. I went slowly down the entire length of the Corso to the public gardens, a sunny meeting place where I thought I might find Angelo. And indeed, there he was, in the thick of a discussion with some country people. We started off at once on our homeward journey.

On the way back, perhaps owing to fatigue, my thoughts assumed a more rational turn. I began, I remember, to think about the publisher whom I should prefer to publish the book, about the binding I should choose, the critics who would write about it, who would like it and who would not. Then I thought of Leda, and I said to myself that I had been very lucky to find her, and perhaps for the first time since our marriage it dawned upon my mind how fragile was the link that bound us. I was almost frightened when I thought how my whole life depended upon her feelings for me and mine for her, how everything might change and how I might lose her. My spirit was troubled at this thought, to the point of anguish; and, feeling my breath fail and my heart tremble, I understood how closely I was now bound to Leda and how I could no longer get on without her. I realized that, in possession of her, I felt myself to be so rich that I sometimes thought I would be able to live without her; but as soon as I imagined myself separated from her, I saw that I should be the most helpless, the most wretched, the most forlorn of men. And this separation might come about any day. All at once I felt utterly depressed and—though the sun was hot—chilled and shuddering from head to foot; my eyes filled with tears and I knew I was growing pale. Almost hysterically I ordered Angelo to quicken the horse's pace: "Good God!" I cried angrily, "we shan't be home till evening, at this rate." Luckily we had by now reached the flat ground, and the horse, knowing its stable was near, broke into a quick trot. I started watching the road anxiously, longing to reach home as soon as possible and to see Leda and find her just as I had left her. Here was the first stretch of main road across open country, then the second, beyond the bridge; and here at last was the final stretch of road along the wall that skirted the park. Here was the gate, and here was the drive. The open space in front of the house was full of sunshine, and on the threshold of the French window, just as though she had been waiting for me there for years—an almost incredible sight after my recent terror—was Leda, in a light-colored dress, a book in her hand. I noticed with delight, from a long way off, her attitude of expectation: evidently she had settled down to read in the drawing-room, leaving the French window open, and at the sound of the trap wheels on the gravel of the drive had at once come out to meet me. The trap stopped, I jumped out and, after greeting her, went into the house.

"It's late," she said, following me; "the barber's been here quite a long time. He's waiting for you upstairs."

"What time is it?" I asked.

"It's after one."

"It was Angelo's fault," I said; "I'll go at once and get shaved and come down again."

She said nothing and went out into the garden. I rushed up the stairs, four at a time, and went into the study. Antonio stood waiting for me beside the table upon which the razors were laid out; he welcomed me with a "good morning" and a slight bow. In a mad hurry I said to him: "Quick, Antonio . . . it's very late. Be as quick as you can," and threw myself into the armchair.

I realized now that I was in a hurry mainly because I was hungry. In the early morning I had had nothing but a cup of coffee, my stomach was empty and my head felt dizzy, and my hunger brought with it a kind of irritability which soon showed itself when Antonio, with his usual slowness, began to unfold the towel to put it round my neck. "Why can't he make haste?" I thought. "I told him I was in a hurry. . . . Devil take him." The composure of Antonio's movements, which formerly had so much pleased me, had now become hateful. I should have liked to tell him to hurry, but since I had already done so I saw that I could not repeat myself and this irritated me afresh. As he turned his back upon me and began stirring the brush round in the wooden soap bowl, I followed his movements with an impatient eye, counting the seconds. My haste and my hunger increased simultaneously.

When he had worked the soap into a good lather, Antonio, holding the brush up in the air, turned to me and began soaping my face. He was unsurpassed in the art of concentrating upon his client's face a whole enormous mass of thick, white foam; but that morning his skillfulness irritated me. Every time the brush circled my cheek I thought it was for the last time, but always I was wrong: catching, with the point of his brush, a flake of froth that threatened to fall, Antonio would begin all over again, always with the same regular movement, to work up the lather on my face. I do not know why, but the idea of lying there in the armchair with froth all over my face gave me a feeling of absurdity; and—even worse—it almost seemed to me that Antonio consciously intended to make me look absurd.

This last suspicion was ridiculous and I immediately rejected it; but it shows how my hunger had upset me. At last, as the movement of the brush over my cheeks seemed to be going on forever, I exclaimed angrily: "I told you to hurry up . . . and you go on and on soaping my face." I saw Antonio throw me a quick glance out of those round, bright, astonished eyes of his, and then, without a word, he put down the brush in the bowl and took up the razor.

But, before he turned away and after I had spoken, he had not been able to resist a final whisk to the lather on my right cheek. I took this gesture of his as an act of disobedience which, I felt, came very near to insolence, and my irritation grew.

He took a moment to strop the razor, then bent over me and started shaving. With his usual lightness and skill he removed the greater part of the lather from my right cheek, and then stretched forward to start on my left. In so doing, he pressed his body against my arm; and for the first time since he had been shaving me I was aware of this pressure. I could not help remembering Leda's accusations. There was no doubt about it, as he bent over me he pressed his body against my arm and shoulder, and I, at this contact, was conscious of a feeling of frantic repugnance. I could feel the softness of the lower part of his stomach, which I pictured to myself as hairy, muscular and sweaty, and enveloped in linen of a doubtful cleanliness; and all at once, through my own shudder of disgust, I seemed to understand that of my wife. It was a disgust of a particular kind, such as inspired by this type of promiscuous, sensual contact which, though entirely casual, cannot but arouse, because of some quality in itself, the suspicion that it is deliberate.

I waited a moment, hoping that he would move. But he did not, nor, indeed, could he; and suddenly my disgust overcame my prudence. With a quick movement I drew back. At the same moment I felt the coldness of the razor as it cut into my cheek.

Immediately, from where I know not, there descended upon me a fury of hatred against Antonio. He had snatched back the razor and was looking at me in astonishment. I leaped to my feet, raising my hand to my cheek from which blood was already flowing, and shouted: "What on earth are you doing? Are you mad?"

"But, Signor Baldeschi," he said, "you moved . . . you jumped violently."

"That's not true," I yelled.

"Signor Baldeschi," he insisted almost beseechingly, with the respectful, almost heartbroken, moderation of a social inferior who knows he is in the right, "how could I have possibly cut you if you hadn't moved? Believe me, you *did* move . . . but it's nothing much—just wait a moment." He went to the table, uncorked a little bottle, took a piece of cotton wool from a packet and soaked it in the alcohol.

Beside myself with rage, I shouted: "What do you mean, it's nothing much? . . . it's a very bad cut"; and, snatching the cotton wool out of his hand, I went over to the mirror. The burning sensation of the alcohol gave the final touch to my exasperation. "So it's nothing much, eh?" I shouted, throwing away the blood-stained cotton wool in a fresh access of fury. "You don't know what you're talking about, Antonio . . . and look here—you'd better clear out."

"But, Signor Baldeschi . . . I haven't finished shaving you . . ."

"That doesn't matter. . . . Clear out and don't show yourself here again," I cried. "I don't want to see you here again—do you understand?"

"But, Signor Baldeschi . . ."

"That's enough . . . go away and don't let me see you again . . . never again . . . get out—do you understand?"

"Am I to come tomorrow?"

"No—not tomorrow nor any other day . . . That's enough, I tell you." I stood shouting in the middle of the room, the towel still tied round my neck. Then I saw him make a slight bow—an ironical bow, I dare say—murmuring, "As you wish"; then he went to the door and disappeared.

Once I was alone, my anger gradually calmed down. I took off the towel, wiped away the small amount of soap that remained on my face and looked at myself in the mirror. Antonio's cut had been inflicted at the point when he had almost finished shaving me, so that my face, apart from the long red wound, was smooth. I soaked another piece of cotton wool in alcohol and disinfected the cut thoroughly. I was thinking, in the meantime, about the strange impulse that had driven me to dismiss Antonio, and I realized that the cut had been merely a pretext. I had in truth been wanting to dismiss him all the time; and at the first opportunity I had done so. But it did not escape me that I had dismissed him only when his dismissal no longer harmed me—that is, after I had finished my story. Consequently I could not represent the barber's dismissal to Leda as an homage to her wishes: I was aware that I had kept Antonio, in spite of her accusations, for selfish reasons and that now, for similar reasons, I had got rid of him. At this thought I was conscious of a certain remorse; and for the first time I began to understand that without realizing it I had not behaved well toward my wife. Meanwhile I was dressing, and when I was finished I went downstairs.

She was already in the dining room, sitting at the table. We ate in silence for some time, then I said: "You know, I've sacked Antonio . . . really and truly."

Without raising her eyes from her plate, she asked: "And what will you do about shaving?"

"I shall try and shave myself," I answered. "Anyhow it's only for a few days, because we shall be leaving here, shan't we? . . . I don't know what came over him today, he gave me a cut as long as my finger . . . look."

She raised her eyes and scrutinized the wound. Then, apprehensively, she asked: "You put some antiseptic on it?"

"Yes . . . and I must tell you that the cut was only an excuse. . . . Actually I couldn't bear Antonio any longer. . . . You were quite right."

"What do you mean by that?"

I saw that I could not produce Angelo's information without deferring the time when I had received it. And so I lied: "This morning I talked to Angelo about Antonio. I discovered that he's an unbridled libertine. It seems he's extremely well known as such throughout the whole district . . . he annoys all the women. So I thought that maybe you were right, although there's still no proof that in your case he acted with intention, and I took advantage of the cut to get rid of him."

She said nothing. I went on: "It's odd, all the same. You'd never think . . . really I don't know what women can see in him—bald, yellow, short, fat. . . . He's not exactly an Adonis."

"Did you find your paper in town?" she asked.

"Not exactly . . . but I got some foolscap paper —that'll do." I saw that the subject of Antonio was displeasing to her and willingly changed the conversation, following her lead. "I shall begin the typing today," I said. "I want to do it in the afternoons and evenings as well. . . . I shall get it done quicker like that."

She was silent and went on eating in a composed manner. I talked a little more about my book and about my plans, and then said: "I'm going to dedicate this book to you, because without your love I should never have written it"; and I took her hand. She raised her eyes and smiled at me. This time, the goodwill of which I seemed to catch a glimpse every now and then in her attitude toward me was so obvious that even a blind man would have noticed it. I was struck dumb, and as I sat holding her hand my enthusiasm chilled. She was smiling at me just as a mother smiles at a small child who, at a moment when she does not want to be bothered with it, runs up to her panting and says: "Mummy, when I'm big I want to be a general." Then she said: "And what will the dedication be?"

Mentally I translated this into: "And which branch of the army do you want to be in?" I answered, rather embarrassed: "Oh, something very simple . . . for instance, *To Leda* . . . or, *To my wife*. . . . Why? Would you like a longer dedication?"

"Oh no, I didn't mean anything."

Her attention was certainly elsewhere. And I, withdrawing my hand, fell into an absorbed silence, gazing through the window at the trees outside. I was thinking that one or other of us ought to break this silence, but nothing happened. Her silence, one would have said, was decisive and final; she seemed shut up in her own thoughts and in no way desirous of coming out of them. In order not to show my disappointment, I tried to joke, and said: "Do you know what dedication a certain writer once made to his wife? *To my wife, without whose absence this book could never have been written.*"

She gave a faint smile and I added hastily: "But of course our case is just exactly the opposite. . . . I could never have written it without your *presence*."

This time she did not even smile. I could not restrain myself any longer, and said: "Well, if you don't want it, we won't put any dedication at all."

Some bitterness must have been discernible in my voice, for she seemed to recollect herself with an effort and, taking my hand again, she replied: "Oh, Silvio, how can you imagine that I don't want it?" But this time again the goodwill was too obvious; it was just like that of a mother whose child, discouraged, says: "Well then, if you don't want me to, I won't be a general," and she answers: "Oh, but I do want you to be one . . . and I want you to win lots of battles." I saw that this conversation was profitless, and I was seized again by the same irritation that I had felt with Antonio and which I had then attributed to hunger. I rose brusquely, saying: "I think Anna's already taken the coffee outside."

12

LATER, when she left me to rest, I went up to my study to begin my typing. I arranged my typewriter on the desk, opened it and put the cover down on the floor. On the right of the machine I placed my manuscript, on the left the blank sheets and the carbon paper. I took three sheets of paper, inserted two sheets of carbon paper between them, put them into the machine and tapped out the title. But I had not aligned the paper correctly, and the title was slanting to one side; besides, I had forgotten to use capital letters. I took out the three sheets and inserted three more. This time the title came out right in the middle, but on examination I found that I had put the carbon paper in upside down, so that the two copies were spoiled.

Irritated, I tore the sheets out of the machine and put in others; this time I made two or three mistakes which made the title incomprehensible. All of a sudden a feeling almost of fear came over me. I rose from the desk and started wandering round the room looking at the old German prints that adorned the walls—"The Castle of Kammersee," "Panorama of the Town of Weimar," "Storm over Lake Starnberg," "The Falls of the Rhine." The house was plunged in a profound silence, the shutters were half closed, and the dim light inside the room invited one to sleep. I reflected that I was tired, that the present conditions were not suitable for me to embark upon my task of copying; so I went and lay down on a very hard sofa in the darkest corner of the room.

I stretched out my hand toward a little table laden with knickknacks that stood beside the sofa, and took up a red leather, gilt-edged memorandum book: it was an old "keepsake" of 1860. Its former owner had made, on each page, a pen-and-ink drawing of a little landscape—very similar, in their homely style, to the prints I had just been looking at. Beneath each landscape, in an "English" style hand-writing, were reflections and maxims in French. I looked at the landscapes one by one and read through many of these extremely sentimental and conventional reflections. Meanwhile drowsiness was coming over me. I put the book back on the table and dropped off to sleep.

I slept for perhaps an hour. In my sleep I seemed to wake up every so often, and I could see the desk, the chair, the typewriter, and thought I ought to be working, and was conscious of a bitter feeling of impotence. Finally, as though at a signal, I awoke completely and leaped to my feet.

The room was deep in gloom. I went to the window and threw open the shutters; the sky was still luminous, but the sun was low and came in slantingly through the window. Without thinking of anything I sat down at the desk and started typing.

I tapped out a couple of pages mechanically and at the third broke off and fell into deep meditation. Actually I was not thinking at all; I simply could not get the sense of the words that I had written with such ardor a few days before. I saw that they were words, but they remained mere words and it seemed to me that they had no weight, no meaning. They were parts of speech, not objects, parts of speech such as are drawn up in rows on the pages of dictionaries, parts of speech and nothing more. At that moment my wife appeared in the doorway, asking whether I wanted to have tea. I welcomed this proposal with relief, glad of some distraction from the feeling of remoteness and absurdity that I experienced in front of my manuscript, and I followed her downstairs. She was already dressed for our customary walk, and tea was on the table. I pulled myself together with an effort and began chatting in a self-possessed manner as I drank my tea. My wife now appeared less abstracted and preoccupied, and this pleased me. After tea we went out and strolled down the drive toward the gate.

As I have already said, there were few walks in that neighborhood; so we turned down a lane that we knew well, through the fields. I walked in front and Leda followed me. My mind, as I soon realized, was still bogged in that sensation of vagueness and lack of comprehension that my manuscript had aroused in me, but I made an effort—with, to tell the truth, only partial success—to thrust away this preoccupation and to talk lightly of unimportant matters. The lane wound about among the fields, according to the layout of the various farms, linking the groups of farm buildings together. Sometimes it would coincide with a threshing floor, in front of an isolated cottage; then it would twist about again between two hedges or along a ditch beside a vegetable garden or by the last row of vines at the edge of a vineyard. In the clear, even, brilliant autumn light the entire plain was visible as far as the eye could reach—every field, every patch of cultivation—flat, luminous, with a few trees here and there, dark against their background of clear sky but with every leaf lit up in the sunshine. When we came to a little humpbacked bridge spanning a deep ditch, I stopped to look at the view and my wife went on in front. I remember that she was wearing a coat and skirt of gray cloth flecked with red, green, yellow and blue. When I first glanced after her as she walked ahead I was frightened, because it suddenly seemed to me that she too, like the words of my manuscript, was nothing more than a speck in space. I said, gently: "Leda," and felt I was saying the most absurd thing in the world. I went on: "My name is Silvio Baldeschi and I married a woman whose name is Leda"; and I felt I had not said anything at all. I realized that the only way I could escape from this atmosphere of unreality was by receiving or inflicting pain —for instance by seizing my wife by the hair, throwing her down on the sharp stones of the path, and receiving from her, in turn, a good kick on the shins. In the same way, perhaps, I should awaken to the value of my manuscript by tearing it up and throwing it into the fire.

These reflections brought me a vivid feeling that I must be mad: was it not then possible to lay hold of one's own, or other people's, existence except through the medium of pain? But I consoled myself slightly with the thought that if it were so, if not only what I had written but also my wife, whom I knew I loved, seemed to me incomprehensible, then this feeling of absurdity did not depend upon the quality of what I had written but upon myself.

My wife was looking for a place to sit down—a difficult matter in a countryside like that, where every foot of space was cultivated, every plant had its use, and every clod of earth held a seed. We came at last to a cleft in the ground at the bottom of which ran a little stream called—perhaps because of its twisting course—the Ess. At this point the grassy banks sloped gently down and the stream formed a tiny pool, like a round mirror of dense green water, overshadowed by three or four poplar trees. A sloping strip of cement, half in and half out of the water, used by women for beating and wringing out clothes, showed that this apparently remote spot was used as a washing-place. But in any case, as Leda said, throwing herself down on the grass, in this part of the country every little corner is put to some use and there is nothing to be done about it.

We started talking quietly, in that moment just before sunset when both light and sound are softened. My wife had picked a blade of grass and was chewing it; and I, sitting a little lower down the bank, was looking at the vague shadows of the poplars reflected in the glassy water of the stream. We spoke for a little about the day and the place, and then, on a very slight pretext (I had asked her if she would like to go up into the mountains in the winter) she started relating an episode in her past life which had occurred in a mountain resort two years before. My wife's first marriage lasted only a very short time, and after that, for ten years, she had lived alone and had had, as I was aware, numerous lovers. I had no feelings of jealousy for these predecessors of mine, and seeing that I was indifferent, she had taken to talking about them, circumspectly at first and then quite openly. Why she should have done so, I do not know: perhaps out of vanity, or—in her present very different circumstances—from a vestige of regret for the uncontrolled freedom she had enjoyed. I cannot say that these stories gave me any pleasure; when I least expected it, I would feel myself giving a start of surprise, the involuntary effect of a sensibility I did not know I possessed. Certainly this was not jealousy; nor was it the complete, rational objectivity that I prided myself on being able to display.

She sat there, chewing her blade of grass, her eyes staring fixedly not at me but at something which she saw in her imagination, and she told me the story of one of her adventures. I was aware that the slightly uncomfortable feeling that her reminiscences usually aroused in me was proving agreeable this time, like a fortifying tonic to someone who is feeling faint. I had been prey to a distressing sense of unreality when I sat down; now that warm, sensual voice of hers was speaking to me of real things, things which had happened and which, in the bargain, had happened to her and were displeasing to me. In more hot-blooded persons these memories might have kindled a raging hatred, but to me, bloodless as I was, they restored a sense of self, of what I was and what she was to me. Certainly I suffered, quite plainly, when I listened to her telling how she had allowed herself to be approached by a man she liked, how she had let herself be kissed, how they had slept together; but this suffering, just sufficing, as it did, to reawaken my failing vitality, became almost pleasant and lost its harmful and gratuitous quality. It was a poison, perhaps, but one of those poisons which, taken in small doses, restore the patient to life.

She was telling me of an adventure that she had had with a red-haired lieutenant in the Alpini. "I was in the mountains in March," she said, "and since the snow had already gone from where I was, I went up and stayed in a climbers' hostel at about five thousand feet. Nobody ever came there, and I spent the days on the terrace in front of the hostel, in a long chair, reading and basking in the sun. One day a group of Alpini came up from the valley. I was on the terrace, as usual, and they started taking off their skis all round about me, so as to go in and have a drink in the hostel. Among them was a young officer, with red hair and a freckled face and blue eyes. He wore no hat or jacket—just a gray-green shirt—and as he stooped down to undo his skis I saw that his back was youthful and vigorous—powerful, but slim at the waist. When he stood up again he looked at me and I at him, and that was enough for me. A great fear came over me that he hadn't understood—whereas he had really understood perfectly well, as you shall see. I remember that I got up and, all upset, I went into the main room of the hostel. He went and stuck his skis upright in the snow and then came in after me. His companions had already sat down at a table and he sat down with them, with his back to the window and his face to the room. I went to the counter and ordered tea, then took a table opposite theirs. They were laughing and joking, and I, like a fool, was trying to catch his eye. Afterwards he told me that he had observed my maneuver; but at the moment, seeing that he did not even deign to glance at me, I thought he had not noticed. At last he looked at me, and then, so that there should be no possible mistake, I put my fingers to my lips and threw him a kiss, like a little girl. He saw me do this but gave no sign of having understood; and then I began to be afraid that he didn't like me. As if I had been too hot, I took off my jacket, and, pretending that I wanted to pull up my shoulder strap under my blouse, I uncovered my shoulder slightly. But the next moment I felt angry, and I left the room and went back to my long chair on the terrace. They sat a while longer over their drinks and then they too came out, took their skis and went off. I sat waiting in my chair, still uncertain. The sun went down and still I waited, numb with cold and now almost without hope. I was completely in despair when he suddenly appeared coming down the slope on his skis. I went forward to meet him, filled with joy, and he said: 'I had to invent a whole lot of excuses . . . they didn't believe me, but that really doesn't matter.' That was what he said, just as though we had always known each other. I didn't answer; I was so excited I hadn't even the strength to speak. He took off his skis very slowly, and I took him by the hand and led him straight to my room upstairs. Fancy! I never knew what his name was!"

I have written down this story in her own brief, laconic words. She never dallied over the sensual part of these recitals of hers; but she appeared to suggest it by the rich tones of her voice and by a kind of lively, carnal participation of her whole body in what she was saying. She became animated; her beauty was intensified. And that day, when she had finished, I seemed to understand that there was, in her, a vitality stronger than any moral rule; and that I myself had a need to draw upon this vitality if—as, indeed, was the case—it was necessary for me to repress certain reactions of my own sensibility. For a moment I had not been a husband listening with a disturbed mind to the love reminiscences of his wife, but rather a dry clod of earth saved from crumbling into dust by the timely fall of a beneficent shower of rain. I looked at her as she sat there, absorbed in thought, chewing her blade of grass, and I realized, to my surprise, that I was no longer conscious of that painful feeling of unreality.

13

WE WENT slowly back to the house, and I was calm and happy again as during my best moments, and I talked and joked with full self-confidence. When we reached the house it was later than usual, and my wife went straight upstairs to her room to change for dinner. I put a record on the console—a Mozart quartet—and sat down in the armchair. I felt myself to be in a joyful, detached state of mind. Soon, when the quartet reached the minuet and entered upon the ceremonious but touching dialogue of this dance, with its loud, sonorous questionings and its melancholy but graceful replies, the thought came to me that there was more in these questions and answers than a mere masculine and feminine tone of voice: there were two well-defined attitudes, one active, the other passive; one aggressive, the other shy; one flattered, the other flattering. The notes, I thought, suggested a relationship that was unchangeable through time, and little did it matter whether the two people who met in the dance belonged to today or to two centuries ago. It might be we two, my wife and I; and this was the dance that we danced in our own way, as, before us, in all ages, innumerable couples had danced it. Lost in my thoughts, I did not notice the passing of time, and was almost astonished when I saw Leda appear in front of me, in the white, low-cut dress of the evening before. She stopped the phonograph halfway through the record, saying with a slight air of impatience: "I don't know why, but I don't want to listen to any music this evening." Then, sitting down beside me, on the arm of my chair, she asked me in a casual tone of voice: "So you're going to begin typing your story this evening?"

As she asked this question, she looked at herself in the mirror from her handbag and readjusted the bunch of fresh flowers in her hair. I answered with satisfaction: "Yes, this evening I shall begin the typing and I shall work at least until midnight. . . . I want to get on with it and finish it within a few days."

Touching her hair, she said: "Until midnight? Won't you be sleepy?"

"Why?" I replied. "I'm used to working at night. . . . " And putting my arm around her waist, I concluded: "I want to finish quickly so as to be able to devote myself completely to you."

She put the mirror back in her bag and asked: "Why? Don't you think we're enough together as it is?"

I answered, in a meaningful tone of voice: "No, not in the way I want."

"Ah, I understand," she said. And, rising from the armchair, she started walking up and down the room in an impatient, tireless sort of way. "What's the matter?" I asked.

"I'm hungry," she replied, in a hard, irritated tone of voice. "That's what's the matter." She added, more gently: "Aren't you hungry too?"

"So-so," I answered, "but I don't want to eat too much, or I shall be sleepy later on."

"You certainly take good care of yourself," she said; and I gave a start, for it was an unpleasant remark and I was not prepared for it.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked quietly.

She saw that she had offended me, and, stopping in front of me, touched me caressingly, saying: "I'm sorry . . . when one's hungry one becomes aggravated. . . . Don't take any notice of me."

"It's quite true," I said, remembering the incident with Antonio. "Hunger makes one irritable."

"Well, well," she went on hastily, "how do you like this frock?"

Possibly she asked me this in order to change the conversation, for, as I have said, it was the same dress that she had worn the evening before and I had already seen it several times. Nevertheless I said, indulgently: "Yes, it's lovely, and it suits you very well. . . . Turn around and let me look."

She revolved obediently, so as to show herself; and then I noticed a small alteration. The evening before I had noted that, around her belly and hips, beneath the light, almost transparent material of the dress, she had worn an American girdle, made of silk and rubber. She put this on sometimes to preserve the correct line of her figure. I did not like this belt, which, besides being visible, was so hard and tight underneath the loose-fitting dress that, to the touch, it was unpleasantly suggestive of some orthopedic apparatus. But now, as I immediately noticed, the belt was not there; and she looked more supple and slightly fatter. "You haven't put on your American armor plate this evening," I said casually.

She glanced at me and then answered with indifference: "I didn't put it on because I was bored with it. . . . But how did you know?"

"Because yesterday you had it on, and it was obvious."

She said nothing, and at that moment the maid came to tell us that dinner was ready. We went into the dining room and sat down, and my wife helped herself. I noticed then that, contrary to what she had said before, she was clearly not hungry: she had taken only half a spoonful from the dish that was offered to her. I remarked as I helped myself: "You were so hungry . . . and now you won't touch anything."

She gave me a look of displeasure, as though she were irritated at my having caught her in a contradiction. "I was wrong," she said. "I'm not really in the least hungry. . . . In fact the sight of food makes me feel rather sick."

"Don't you feel well?" I asked anxiously.

She hesitated, then answered all in one breath, in a very low voice: "I think I'm all right . . . but I'm not hungry." I noticed that her voice was languid, and her breath seemed almost to fail her between one syllable and the next. Then she was silent, poking about with her fork in her plate; then she put down the fork and sighed deeply, laying her hand on her breast. "But you *don't* feel well," I said, alarmed.

This time she admitted it. "No . . . I feel rather oppressed," she said in an exhausted voice, as though she were going to faint.

"Would you like to lie down on the divan?"

"No."

"Would you like me to call the maid?"

"No . . . but you can give me something to drink."

I poured out some wine for her, and drinking it appeared to revive her. The maid brought in the fruit and she did not touch it; I ate a bunch of grapes, slowly, while she looked at me with eyes that seemed to be counting each single grape as I raised it to my mouth. The moment the stripped stalk fell from my hand, she jumped impetuously to her feet, saying: "Now I'm going to bed."

"Don't you want any coffee?" I asked, alarmed at her loud, distressed tone of voice, as I followed her into the drawing-room.

"No, no coffee, I want to sleep." She was standing at the door as she spoke, stiff, impatient, her fingers on the handle.

I told the maid to bring my coffee to the study upstairs and followed my wife, who had already opened the door and was making for the staircase. I joined her and said, in a casual way: "Now I shall start work."

"And I shall sleep," she answered, without turning round.

"Are you sure you haven't a temperature?" I asked, reaching out to place my hand on her forehead. She dodged away and said, impatiently: "Oh, Silvio, with you it's always necessary to dot the i's and cross the t's . . . I'm not well—and that's all there is to it."

I was silent, feeling slightly embarrassed. When we reached the landing, I took her hand as though to kiss it, hesitated, and then said: "I want to ask you a favor."

"What favor?" she asked, with a break in her voice which surprised me.

"I want you to come in here a moment," I said awkwardly, "and leave a kiss on the first page of my story. . . . It'll bring me luck."

She gave a laugh which was at the same time affectionate and forced; but both the affection and the effort seemed to me to be oddly sincere. And she went hastily into my study, exclaiming: "How superstitious you are! . . . How silly you are! . . . But just as you like. . . ."

I turned on the light, but she had already found her way in the darkness to my desk. "Which is the page? . . . Tell me which page it is I've got to kiss," she kept repeating with a sort of feverish enthusiasm.

I went up to her and handed her the first page, on which I had typed nothing but the title: *Conjugal Love*. She seized hold of it, read the title aloud, commenting on it with a facial expression which I could not understand, then raised the sheet of paper to her mouth and pressed her lips against it. "Now are you content?" she said.

Just beneath the title, the page now bore the mark of her lips—two red semicircles, like two flower-petals. I looked at it for some time, with a feeling of satisfaction, and then I said softly: "Thank you, my dear."

She raised her hand and quickly stroked my cheek, then moved toward the door, saying hurriedly: "Good luck with your work then . . . I'm going to go and sleep. I really feel very tired. . . . Please don't knock at my door for any reason whatsoever. I just want to sleep—that's all. . . . Till tomorrow, then. . . ."

"Very well . . . till tomorrow."

She went out, almost running into the maid who was bringing in the coffee. When she too had gone, I lit a cigarette, sat down at my desk, drank two cups of coffee straight off, and finally took the cover off the typewriter. I was conscious of an extraordinary mental lucidity, as though, instead of the usual confused, unwieldy tangle of vague and contradictory thoughts, my head contained a clean, precise, perfectly adjusted mechanism like that of a weighing-machine or a clock. I felt that this mechanism excluded all vanity, pride, fear and ambition. It was the precision instrument, incorruptible, impersonal, by means of which I was preparing to gauge, to appraise, to perfect my work as I copied it out. A cigarette between my lips, my eyes fixed on my sheet of paper, I started typing, continuing the page which was already half done.

I typed, perhaps, four lines, and then I put down my cigarette in the ashtray, pushed the typewriter to one side, took up the manuscript and began to read it. I was feeling exceptionally clear in the head; and now, as I typed the first four lines, I became conscious of a feeling of falsity which was quite distinct and exactly like the dull sound of a cracked glass. In other words, it flashed across my mind that the story not merely was not the masterpiece that I had imagined, but was actually bad. As I have said, I have a certain literary experience and, in given circumstances, am also capable of being a tolerable critic. I realized at that moment that with my present extraordinary and aggressive mental lucidity, my whole critical faculty was brought into play upon the page I held in my hand. The words were no longer mere words but fragments of a metal that I was gradually testing, with perfect certainty, by means of the touchstone of my own taste. I did not read it straight through because I did not wish to be caught up in the rhythm of the narrative; but I read pieces here and there, and the more I read the more disquieted I became. It seemed to me impossible that I was making a mistake now: the story was thoroughly bad, beyond any remedy. All of a sudden, seized by an almost scientific craze for objectivity, I took a sheet of blank paper, grasped my fountain pen and started jotting down my observations as they came into my mind, just as I did when I had a book to review.

At the top of the page I wrote, in a firm hand: "Remarks upon the story *Conjugal Love*, by Silvio Baldeschi"; then I drew a line under it and began to make notes. I followed the method I usually adopted in composing my critical articles—that is, analyzing the work disconnectedly in all its various aspects and then finally fusing all these detailed observations into one single, comprehensive verdict. Of course I had no intention of writing an article about myself; I merely wished to establish the reasons for that first feeling that the story was bad. Also, perhaps, to punish myself for having believed it a masterpiece. But, above all, to reach some clear and final conclusion about my own literary ambitions.

14

THIS IS what I wrote on my new page. *First:* style. And then, underneath, quickly: polished, correct, decorous, but never original, never personal, never fresh. Full of vague generalizations, discursive where it should be brief, brief where it should be discursive, in effect entirely redundant because entirely the result of application. A style without character, the style of a diligent composition in which there is not the slightest trace of poetical feeling. *Second:* plasticity. None. States things instead of representing them, writes them instead of portraying them. Lack of evident truth, of volume, of solidity. *Third:* characters. Negative. One feels they were not created by sympathetic intuition but studiously copied and transcribed from nature through the instrumentality —in any case defective—of a judgment that was indecisive, clouded and elementary. They are mosaics of minute but lifeless observations, not living, free creations. They disintegrate, they contradict themselves, they disappear, at moments, from the page, leaving only their names behind; and these names—

whether the characters are called Paolo or Lorenzo or Elisa or Maria—betray their unreality because one feels that they could be changed without doing any harm. They are not characters at all, in fact, but photographs out of focus. *Fourth:* psychological truth. Poor. Too much casuistry, too many subtleties, too many irrelevant remarks, and too little common sense. "Psychologism," not psychology. One feels that the author moves from outside to inside, at random, not by the main road of truth but along the byways of sophistry. *Fifth:* feeling. Cold and withered, beneath swellings and outbursts and flights which betray its real emptiness and feebleness. Sentimentality, not feeling. *Sixth:* plot. Ill-constructed, unbalanced, full of incongruities, of subterfuges and padding and other dishonest tricks beneath its apparent efficiency and smoothness. Plenty of *deus ex machina* and interventions on the part of the author. Movement is confined to the periphery, and is mechanical, for at the center there is no motive power. *Seventh and last:* comprehensive verdict. The book of a dilettante, of a person who, though endowed with intelligence, culture and taste, is completely lacking in creative powers. The book fails to reveal anything fresh, or any fresh turn of sensibility. It is a book founded upon other books, it is second or third rate in quality, it is a hot-house product. Practical conclusion: can it be published? Yes, of course, it can certainly be published—why not in an *édition* *de luxe,* with one or two lithographs by some good artist? And, after a suitable propaganda drive in literary circles, it could also have what is commonly called a *succès d'estime*, that is, a number of reviews that are eulogistic, even enthusiastic, according to whether it is worth the reviewers' while and according to their degree of friendliness toward the author. *But the book itself does not count.* I underlined this last sentence that summed up everything that I thought about my story, considered for a moment, and then added the following postscript: the fact remains, however, that the book was written in a state of mind of the most perfect and enthusiastic happiness and that it is certainly the best that can be expected from the author. Indeed the latter, while he was writing it, was convinced that he had created a masterpiece. It follows from this that the author expressed himself in the book as he really is—a man lacking in creative feeling, a mere daydreamer, well-intentioned, sterile. This book is the faithful mirror of such a man.

That was all for the moment. I put the manuscript back in its folder, took the sheets of paper out of the typewriter and put its cover on. Then I got up, lit a cigarette and started walking up and down the room. It dawned upon me then that the mental clear-sightedness, with which I had before been so pleased, had now transformed itself into the false lucidity of a feverish, desperate delirium. After having made me write that severe judgment upon my own work, this lucidity still persisted in my mind, as moonlight persists on the surface of a stormy sea where float the fragments, great and small, of a shipwreck. My mind circled lucidly, feverishly, round the final wreck of my ambitions, illuminating it in all its aspects and rendering it all the more bitter and complete. In those twenty days during which I had done nothing but write, closing my mind against all other preoccupations, an enormous mass of discouragement seemed to have accumulated in the depth of my consciousness. Now the dykes of my crazy presumption had burst and it came flooding out in every direction; and I, though so lucid, felt myself overwhelmed. I threw away the cigarette I had just lit, and almost without knowing what I did, raised my hands and pressed them against my temples. I realized that the failure of my book foreshadowed the far wider failure of my whole life, and I felt that my whole being rebelled against this result. It is impossible to describe what I felt—the acute sense of a sudden crumbling to pieces, of a headlong plunge into absurdity and emptiness. Above all, I rebelled against the picture of myself provided by my book. I did not want to be a trifler, an incompetent, a weakling. And yet I knew that just because I rebelled against it this picture was a true one.

In this fury of despair I felt as if my body no longer had any weight and I was flying about the room, like a dry, dead leaf swept along by a violent wind. I was no longer aware of the movements I made, nor even of the thoughts that formed themselves in my brain. No doubt the idea of appealing to my wife in this distress, with the object of finding not so much consolation as a straw to seize hold of in the flood that overwhelmed me, flashed into my mind before I translated it into action. But it is certain that I became conscious of it when, without realizing it, I had already opened the study door, had crossed the landing and found myself in front of her door. I raised my hand and knocked. I noticed at the same moment that the door was not shut but merely ajar, and I was struck—I do not know why—by the precautionary appearance that it had in that position. There was no answer to my two knocks, so I knocked again, louder, and then, after waiting a reasonable time, pushed the door open and went in.

The room was dark, so I turned on the central light, and the first thing I saw, in that pale illumination, was my wife's nightdress laid out, the sleeves outspread, on the untouched bed. I thought she must have been unable to sleep and had gone down into the garden; but at the same time I could not help feeling a certain annoyance: she could have knocked and told me—why should she have gone alone? I glanced at the alarm clock on the bed-table and was astonished to see that about three hours had passed since I had made my wife kiss the title-page of my story.

Events had followed so thick and fast upon each other that it had seemed to me to be scarcely half an hour. I left the room and went on down the staircase.

The blue and red glass door of the drawing room was lit up, and the whole house appeared to be awake. I went into the room, sure that I should find my wife there, but it was deserted. The book that she was reading was on the table, open and upside down, as though she had put it down in the midst of her reading. Beside the book was an ashtray full of long cigarette butts, stained with lipstick. My wife had obviously come downstairs again shortly after saying good night to me and had spent the evening in the drawing room, smoking and reading. Then she must have gone out for a walk in the garden; but not long before, since the air was still filled with smoke in spite of the French window being wide open. Perhaps she had only just that moment gone out and I could catch up with her. So I, in my turn, went out to the open space in front of the house.

The white gleam of the moonlight on the gravel reminded me of our walk the night before to the farm buildings; and suddenly, in my state of combined despair and exaltation, I was overcome with the desire to do, now, that thing which it had not been possible for me to do then. I would make love to Leda on the threshing floor, by the light of that magnificent full moon, in the silence of the sleeping countryside, with all the passion that came to me from the sense of my own impotence. It was certainly a very natural, very logical, very ordinary impulse that suggested this plan to me; but this time I was content to let myself go, both in feeling and action, like a peasant who seeks, in the docile embrace of his wife, comfort and a sort of compensation for damage done by a hailstorm. After all, nothing remained to me, in the wreck of my ambition, but to accept my status as a human being, similar in all respects to that of other men. After that night I would be content to be just a decent fellow with some knowledge of letters and modestly conscious of his own limitations, but at the same time the lover, and the beloved, of a young and beautiful wife. It would be upon her that I would exercise my unfortunate passion for poetry. I would live this amorous experience of mine poetically, seeing that I could not write about it. Women love these unsuccessful men who have renounced all ambitions except that of making them happy.

Thinking thus, I had started down the drive, deeply absorbed as I walked, and with head bowed. Then I raised my eyes and saw Leda. Or rather, I caught a glimpse of her just for one moment, a long way away, as she rounded the curve of the drive and disappeared. A ray of moonlight lay across the road at that point. For one instant I saw distinctly her white dress, her bare neck and the fair gold of her hair. Then she vanished, and I was convinced that she was going toward the farm buildings. It pleased me to think that she was making her way to the threshing floor, to the place where I wanted to make love to her, just as though she were going to keep an appointment and yet without knowing that the appointment was with me. I too rounded the curve, and then I saw her again as she turned into a side lane which, as I knew, led into the path that ran between the fields and the park. I almost called out to her but checked myself, thinking that I would catch up with her and throw my arms round her, taking her by surprise.

I was in the lane when she turned into the path; and when I started along the path, she was already walking along the bottom of the knoll on which the farm buildings stood. She was almost running, and for the first time her white face, as it passed quickly through the black shadows of the trees, gave me a feeling of strangeness. When I in turn arrived below the farm buildings I stopped, struck by some presentiment that I could not explain. I could see her now climbing up the steep slope toward the threshing floor, where stood the round masses of straw. Bending forwards, she clutched at the bushes as she slipped and stumbled, and in her strained, eager face with its staring eyes, in the movement of her whole body, I was once more conscious of her resemblance to a goat, climbing a slope in search of food. Soon, when she reached the top, the figure of a man appeared out of the shadow, bent down, took her by the arm and pulled her up almost bodily. Twisting around in order to steady her, the man turned and I recognized Antonio.

Now I understood everything. A great coldness came over me, and at the same time an utter astonishment that I had not understood before—not just a short time before, when I had gone into her room and found it empty, but three weeks ago, when she had asked me to dismiss the barber. This wondering astonishment was mingled with a cruel distress which took my breath away and lay heavy on my heart. I wanted not to look, if only out of self-respect; instead of which I stared greedily, with straining eyes. The threshing floor was like a stage high above me, lit by the moon. When Leda was standing upright again, I saw the man seize her by the arms, seeking to pull her toward him, and she, twisting and pulling herself back, was trying to resist. The moonlight fell on her face, and then I saw that it was distorted into that mute, tense grimace that I had noticed on other occasions; her mouth was half open in a grin that displayed both disgust and desire, her eyes were dilated and her chin thrust out. Meanwhile her whole body, with its violent writhings that suggested some kind of dance, seemed a continuation of her facial distortion.

Antonio was trying to draw her to him and she was resisting him and pulling away from him. Then —I do not know how—she turned her back on him, he seized her by the elbows and she started twisting and writhing again with her back against him, throwing herself back into his arms and yet refusing him her mouth. I noticed that in these spasmodic contortions of hers, she raised herself up on the tips of her toes; and again the idea of a dance came to me. For a short time they continued struggling together in this way, one behind the other, and then, changing position—as though in some new kind of minuet—there they were, side by side. Her arm was thrown across his chest, his arms were around her waist and her head was flung back. Then they slipped back, one against the other, and were face to face again. This time she drew back her head and her breast as he held her in his arms, and at the same moment lifted her dress, uncovering her legs and her belly. For the first time I realized that those legs were the legs of a dancer—white, muscular, slim, with feet extended and supported on the tips of her toes. She threw back the upper part of her body and thrust her belly forward against his, while he stood still and tried to make her stand straight so that he could embrace her. The moonlight shone upon the pair, and it looked now as though they were really performing some kind of dance, he erect and motionless, she circling about him: a dance without music and without rules but none the less obedient to a frantic rhythm of its own. Finally she caused him to lose his balance, or he did so deliberately; and they fell back together, disappearing into the shadow of one of the stacks.

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I WAS almost sorry to see them disappear. The moon, between the two haystacks in shadow, was shining brilliantly on the empty threshing floor, upon the spot where I had seen them pressed together in their dance, and for a moment I thought that it had not been my wife and the barber whom I had seen, but two nocturnal spirits conjured up by the splendor of the moonlight. I was overwhelmed by what I had witnessed, but I made a great effort to control myself and to take a detached view of it; in this my æsthetic sense came to my rescue, and for the first time I felt that it was being put to a supreme test. I remembered that on the previous evening the moonlight on the threshing floor had suggested to me the idea of panic love in the mild, silent night; and I saw that my thought and my desire had been right. Only, at the last moment, someone else had taken my place. I had divined, instinctively, the beauty of that embrace; but the embrace had taken place without me.

There flashed upon me, however, a sudden suspicion that this effort to be objective was merely a device on the part of wounded pride; and I said to myself that I could reason and understand as much as I liked, but the fact remained: I had been cruelly deceived, my wife had betrayed me with a barber, and this betrayal stood between me and my wife. At this thought I felt a sharp pain; and I realized that, for the first time since I had seen Leda in Antonio's arms, I was assuming the role that had been forced upon me—that of the husband of an unfaithful wife. But at the same time I knew that I was neither willing nor able to accept that position. I had not hitherto been a husband like other husbands; our relations had been just as I had wished them to be and not as our married state might have prescribed; and so they must remain. I must continue to be reasonable and, above all, understanding. This was my vocation, and not even betrayal could justify my abandoning it. Even as I ran back toward the villa, I started feverishly reconstructing in my mind the exact course events had taken between myself, my wife and Antonio.

The man, it was certain, was a libertine, but it was possible that at the beginning there had been no deliberate intention on his part, and that the first contact with my wife had been merely accidental. In the same way she had been truly and sincerely indignant at what she had called "want of respect" on the part of the barber—although the excess of this indignation concealed, even at that time, the beginnings of an unconscious excitement and attraction. Actually, in asking me to dismiss the barber, she had asked me to defend her—not so much against the barber as against herself—but I had not understood and, selfishly, had thought of nothing but my own immediate convenience. She had not discerned the selfishness in my behavior, just as she had not understood the deeper motives of her own, and she had resigned herself, as she usually did, out of affection and goodwill. She had thus endured a situation in which the man who had insulted her and toward whom she did not know she was so violently attracted came to the house every day. Several days had passed in this way, in a disingenuous truce to our disagreements and our passions—a truce selfishly intended by me in order that I might bring my work to an end, and which had merely served to sharpen the disagreements and bring the passions to a head. After three weeks my work had been finished, but, during the same period, my wife had—perhaps without realizing it—reached the extreme limit of her confused, obscure desire. My expedition to the town had then been all that was needed to make her see the true nature of her first disdain for the barber.

Antonio had arrived, had failed to find me; somehow or other they had met, on the stairs or in the study; perhaps he had made violent advances to her, or perhaps she had taken the initiative. Anyhow, there had been an understanding, a sudden, complete, final understanding. From that moment onwards Leda's behavior had been characterized by the inflexibility, the velocity, the weight of a stone that plunges through space to the bottom of a deep ravine. With a cruelty that was perhaps not unconscious, she had made an appointment with Antonio at that same place at which, the night before, I had tried to make love to her. After Antonio had gone, she had acted with cold and brutal determination, without scruples either of delicacy, of caution, or even of ordinary good taste, just as an enemy might act, not a wife who still loves her husband. She had made sure that I would be working that night when she went to her appointment, and she had played with me like a cat with a mouse in telling me that tale of her adventure with the Alpini officer, obviously suggested by her meeting with Antonio that morning. When evening came she had taken care in dressing not to put on the American girdle, so as to be more expeditious, more naked, more tempting. While I was eating she had made no attempt to conceal her own harsh impatience, disdaining even to have recourse to the hypocrisy which in such cases implies a homage, if not to virtue, at least to good manners. It had needed all my blindness not to see that her lack of appetite was due to that other appetite, so far more masterful. But, fearing that I should take her pretended indisposition too seriously and might even wish to keep her company in her room, she had explained it, cynically, by letting me suppose it was her monthly disorder. While I shut myself up to write in my study, she had been sitting downstairs for three hours, smoking one cigarette after another, counting the minutes and the seconds. When the time came, she had run to her appointment; and that kind of dance, at which I had been a spectator, had been simply the final explosion of the powerful too-long-repressed mechanism of her lust.

I must state, at this point, that I recognized in the whole of Leda's behavior the deceitful yet transitory resoluteness of actions that break suddenly out from the buried places of the consciousness and are then re-absorbed, like rivers in the desert. I recognized, in other words, in these actions the furious but short-lived impetus of the involuntary infraction of an acknowledged rule. All that had happened between her and Antonio had not affected in the slightest degree her relations with me. Her intrigue with the barber—which, in all probability, would not survive that night—and her ties with me, of a year's duration, were two different things, on two entirely different planes. I was sure that, if I said nothing, Leda would go on loving me as in the past, and perhaps more; and that she herself would take steps to get rid of Antonio next day, even if she had not already done so. But this thought, far from comforting me as it should have done, depressed me even more. It was one more proof of my incapacity, of my feebleness, my impotence. To me, both creative art and my wife were granted only through pity, through affection, benevolence, reasoned goodwill; the fruits of this concession would never be either love or poetry, but merely a process of forced, decorous composition, a tepid, chaste felicity. Not for me the true masterpiece, not for me the dance on the threshing floor. I was relegated, forever, to mediocrity.

Meanwhile, still carried along by my grief as though by a wind, I had crossed the park, I had entered the house, I had mounted the stairs, I had returned to my task. There I sat, pen in hand, in front of a sheet of paper at the top of which I had written: "Dearest Leda." It was the letter of final and absolute farewell to my wife. Then I realized that I was weeping.

I do not know how much I wept; I only know that I wept and wrote at the same time, and that, as I wrote, the tears fell upon the words and blotted them out. I wanted to tell her that all was over between us two and that it was better for us to part, but as I thought and wrote down these things, I felt a violent pain and a refusal on the part of my whole body, which seemed to express itself in this uninterrupted flood of tears. I realized that I was closely tied to her, that it did not in the least matter to me that she had betrayed me, and that, in the long run, it did not matter to me even if she gave herself to others for love and reserved, for me, nothing but simple affection. I tried to imagine, at moments, what life would be like without her, and I knew that, after having for so many years thought of suicide, I should really kill myself this time. Nevertheless I went on writing and weeping. And so I finished the letter and signed it. But, when I started reading it over, I saw that it was all blotted out by tears and I knew I should never have the courage to send it.

At that moment I had an exact perception of the weakness of my own character, made up, as it was, of impotence and morbidity and selfishness; and I accepted it completely, all at once. I knew that, after that night, I should be a much more modest man, and that perhaps, if I so wished, I should be able, if not exactly to change, at least to correct, myself, since in that one single night I had learned more about myself than in all the other years of my life. This thought calmed me. I rose from the desk, went into my bedroom and bathed my red, swollen eyes. Then I went back into the study and stood at the window that looked out to the front of the house.

I stood there at least ten minutes, thinking of nothing and allowing the silence and serenity of the night to calm the tumult of my spirit. I was not thinking about Leda, and was surprised when I saw her suddenly appear at one corner of the open space and run toward the door. In order to move more speedily, she was holding up her long dress with both hands; and, seen like that from above, as she darted across the moonlit gravel, she made me think of some little wild animal, a fox or a weasel, which, furtive, innocent, its coat still stained with blood, scurries back to its lair after a raid on a chicken-run. This sensation was so strong that I seemed to see her transformed into an animal, and I was conscious, for one moment, of that look of innocence as of a physical quality—almost like some wild odor. And, in spite of myself, I could not help smiling affectionately. Then, still running, she raised her eyes toward me as I stood at the window. Her eyes met mine, and I thought I detected in hers a presentiment of an unpleasant scene. She lowered her head immediately and went into the house. Slowly I drew back from the window, and went and sat down on the sofa.

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A MOMENT LATER the door opened and she swept in. I recognized, in this aggressiveness of hers, a defensive move, and I could not help smiling again. Still holding the door handle, she asked: "What are you doing—aren't you working?"

Without raising my head, I answered: "No."

"I went for a stroll in the park, as I couldn't sleep," she said, providing me with an explanation which I had not asked for; "but what's the matter with you?"

In the meantime she had walked toward the desk. But clearly she did not dare to come any nearer to me. Standing upright beside the desk, she looked at the scattered papers. I went on, with an effort: "This evening I made a discovery—a decisive discovery . . . which is going to have an important effect on my life."

I looked at her. Still standing beside the desk, she was staring at the typewriter, frowning, and with a fixed, angry look. In a loud voice she asked: "What discovery?"

So she was preparing to answer me back, I found myself thinking. Her attitude reminded me of that of certain insects, which, in danger, rise threateningly on their hind feet—an attitude which is called by naturalists the "spectral" attitude. I seemed to hear her voice shouting: "Yes, I gave myself to the barber, I *like* the barber. . . . Well, now you know; do what you like." I sighed and went on: "I discovered, when I read over my story, that it's quite worthless and that I shall never be a writer."

I saw her standing there, still and silent, and with an air of incredulity at the sound of words so different from those she expected. Then, with a note of violence still lingering in her voice, she exclaimed: "Whatever do you mean?"

"I'm telling you the truth," I replied calmly; "I was deceiving myself. . . . While I was writing the story it seemed to me a masterpiece, but it's really an abortion . . . and I'm nothing but a hopelessly mediocre person."

She passed her hand across her forehead and then came slowly and sat down beside me. It was clear that she was making an effort to take over the unexpected, difficult role that was being forced upon her, and that she had the utmost difficulty in doing so. "But, Silvio," she said, "how can that be possible? You were so certain."

"Now I'm certain of the exact opposite," I answered, "so much so that for a moment I almost thought of killing myself."

As I said this I raised my eyes and looked at her. And then I realized that, the whole time, even while I had been talking about my story, I had been thinking of her. It mattered little to me, now, that the story was bad; but I could not help feeling a sharp stab of pain when I noticed the traces of her affair with Antonio which were visible all over her. Her hair was disordered, its curls loosened, and I thought I could even see a few straws still sticking in it. The bunch of flowers was no longer there; it had presumably been left on the threshing floor. Her mouth was pale and discolored, but with a few smears of lipstick here and there that gave her whole face a battered and distorted look. Her dress, too, was crumpled; and at the height of the knee there was a fresh stain of earth, produced, apparently, by a fall.

I realized that she knew she was in this state and that she had acted deliberately in appearing as she was. Otherwise she could easily have gone first to her room and cleaned herself up, touched up her face, taken off her dress and put on a dressing-gown. At this thought I felt a fresh spasm of pain, being confronted, as it seemed, with an arrogant and ruthless hostility. She was saying, in the meantime: "Kill yourself? Why, you're crazy . . . and all for a story that didn't turn out right."

I translated this, mentally, into: "All for one moment of aberration . . . because I couldn't resist a passing temptation." And I said: "For me this story was extremely important. . . . I know I'm a failure now . . . and I have the proof of it—in this manuscript"; and as I said it I made a brusque, almost involuntary gesture, pointing not in the direction of the desk upon which the manuscript lay, but toward her.

This time she understood (or perhaps she had already understood but had hoped to deceive me), and she lowered her eyes in a kind of confusion. The hand that she held in her lap moved downwards to her knee in order to hide the earthy stain. Bodily love is exhausting, and there are certain pretenses which depend, for their efficacy, upon a physical impetus. At that moment, hampered by weariness of the senses and by her outward disorder, she must certainly have found it very difficult to recover herself and play her usual part as an affectionate wife. I feared some inept remark and said to myself that this time I would tell her the truth. Then I heard her voice, unexpectedly tremulous, asking: "Why a failure? You didn't think of me, then?"

I dwelt for a moment upon the feeling of surprise that these words gave me. There was more in her question than mere audacity and slyness—admirable, possibly, but only as a flash of unwonted smartness; there was—or so it seemed to me—a touching sincerity. I asked, in turn: "And what can you do for me? You can't possibly give me the talent that I lack."

"No," she said, in the sensible, simple way she sometimes had, "but I love you."

She put out her hand toward me, seeking mine, and gazing at me all the time with those eyes of hers which seemed to become steadily clearer and more luminous as her feeling for me regained its strength and dispelled her recent excitement. I took her hand, kissed it, and fell on my knees in front of her. "I love you too," I said softly, "and by now you ought to know it . . . but I'm afraid that isn't enough to keep me alive."

I kept my face pressed against those legs which, a short time before, I had seen, naked, executing the dance of desire on the threshing floor. Meanwhile I was pondering over the meaning of her words. And this is what I gathered from them: "I have done wrong, because I was led astray by desire . . . but I love you, and that's the only thing that counts for me. . . . I am sorry and I won't do it again."

And so everything was as I had foreseen. But now I no longer felt inclined to reject that affection of hers, however insufficient it might be. I heard her saying: "When these fits of despair come over you, you must try and think of me. . . . After all, we love each other, and that has some importance."

"Think of you?" I answered softly. "And do you think of me?"

"Always."

I said to myself that she was not lying. Probably she did think of me always and had thought of me always—even when, a short time ago, she had given herself to Antonio at the threshing floor. I might have found a certain absurdity in the way she thought of me, so constant, so ineffective, which not merely had not prevented her from betraying me, but which—as does indeed happen—had perhaps made her betrayal actually more alluring and richer in flavor. But I preferred to tell myself that she really did think of me all the time as one thinks of an unsolved and yet vital question that lies at the center of one's more creditable preoccupations. Her thought was dictated, perhaps, by goodwill; but it suited me to think that, apart from goodwill, everything in her was dark and confused, and predisposed her to give way to temptations of the kind that had thrown her into Antonio's arms. And so it was that we were speaking different languages. I gave no importance at all to goodwill—which was made up, it seemed to me, merely of reasoning and common sense—but a great deal, on the other hand, to instinct, without which I considered that there could be neither love nor art; whereas she placed a high value upon this goodwill, which evidently appeared to her to be the best part of herself, and rejected instinct as being both wrong and inadequate. I reflected that one always loves the thing one does not possess. Full of confused instinct, she had perforce to respect clear reason, whereas I, full of bloodless reason, was naturally attracted by the richness of instinct. I found myself murmuring: "And art? Can art be created by goodwill?"

She was stroking my head and certainly did not hear those words of mine, spoken, as they were, in a very low voice; but, just as though she had heard them, she went on, a moment later, in a lively, self-possessed, affectionate voice: "Come on, get up. . . . And do you know what we'll do now? I'll go and undress and get into bed, and then you can come and read me your story. . . . We'll see whether it's really so bad."

She rose as she spoke, with a brisk movement of her whole body. I rose too, feeling dazed and protesting that it was not worth the trouble, that there was no doubt that the story was bad and there was nothing to be done about it. But she stopped me, putting her hand to my mouth and exclaiming: "Now, come along . . . it's too early to tell yet. . . . Now I'm going to my room and you can join me there in a few minutes." Before I could speak, she had gone out.

When I was alone, I went to the desk and automatically took up the manuscript. And so, I thought, her goodwill was growing in strength and there was no doubt that she was sincere. Could I hope that this goodwill would triumph over the next temptation? I knew that only the future could answer that question for me.

I lit a cigarette and stood motionless, smoking, beside the desk. When I thought a long enough time had passed, I left the room, the manuscript under my arm, and went and knocked at her door. She at once called out to me, in a cheerful sing-song voice, to come in.

She was already in bed, sitting upright, in a magnificent nightdress adorned with openwork and lace. The room was in darkness except for the head of the bed, upon which fell the light of the bedside lamp. She was leaning against the pillows, her arms stretched out on the sheet in front of her, with a welcoming, expectant air. Her face was exquisitely made up, all her curls were in place, and there was a new bunch of fresh flowers above her left temple. She was very beautiful, and upon her face lay that sparkling mysterious serenity in which her beauty seemed, above all, to consist. I was astonished, as I looked at her, at the thought that her face, now so calm and luminous, could have been distorted, a short time before, into that hectic grimace of lust. Smiling, she said: "Cheer up! You see I've put on my best nightie to listen to you."

I sat down, slantwise, on the edge of the bed, and said: "I'm reading it to you only because you want me to. . . . I've already told you it's bad."

"Never mind. . . . Come on. I'm listening."

I took up the first page and began reading. I read the whole story straight through without stopping, merely casting a glance at her, now and then, as she listened seriously and attentively. As I read I was confirmed in my former opinion: the thing was respectable, and that was all. Nevertheless this "respectability" which, not long before, had seemed to me a characteristic which had no importance, now—I do not know why—appeared to have more weight than I had imagined. This less unfavorable impression, however, did not distract my mind from its main preoccupation, which was my wife. I was wondering all the time what she would say at the end of the reading. There seemed to me to be two courses open to her: the first consisted in exclaiming immediately: "But, Silvio, what do you mean, it's very fine indeed"; the second, in admitting that the story was mediocre. The first was the way of indifference and deceit. By giving me to understand that the story was good when she thought it was not (and she could not but think so), she would be showing clearly that she wished to lead me by the nose, and that between her and me there could be a relationship merely of falsity and pity. The second was the way of love, even if it was only a love like hers, made up of goodwill and affection. I wondered, not without anxiety, which way she would choose. If she said that the story was good, I had made up my mind to cry: "The story's bad and you're nothing but a whore!"

I read through the whole story with this idea in mind, and, the nearer I drew toward the end, the more I slowed down the pace of my reading, being fearful of what would happen. Finally I read the last sentence, and then said: "That's all," raising my eyes toward her.

We looked at each other in silence; and, like a passing cloud in a clear sky, I saw a shadow of deceit spread, for one moment, over her face. For one moment, certainly, she thought of lying to me, of crying out that the story was good and thus revealing herself in all her coldness and cunning and in the act of administering the false comfort of a pitying flattery. But this shadow vanished almost at once; and it seemed to be replaced by a love for me which consisted, first of all, in truth toward me and respect for me. In a voice full of a sincere disappointment, she said: "Perhaps you're right. . . . It isn't the masterpiece you thought. . . . But neither is it as bad as you think now. It's interesting to listen to."

Greatly relieved, I answered almost joyfully: "Didn't I tell you so?"

"It's very well written," she went on.

"It's not enough, to write well."

"But perhaps," she said, "perhaps you haven't worked at it enough. . . . If you rewrote it—more than once, if necessary—in the end it would be just as you want it to be."

She was thinking, then, that in art too, goodwill was of greater value than the gifts of instinct. "But I want it to be," I said, "exactly as inspiration produces it—or lack of inspiration. . . . And if there isn't inspiration it's not worth while working and worrying at it."

"That's just where you're wrong," she exclaimed with animation. "You don't give enough importance to work and worry . . . but really they're extremely important. That's the way things get done—they don't just happen, as though by a miracle."

We went on arguing for some time, both of us firm in our own very different points of view. Finally I folded the manuscript in four and thrust it into my pocket, saying: "Well, well, don't let's talk about it any more."

There was a moment's silence. Then I said softly: "You don't mind having an unsuccessful writer for a husband?"

She answered at once: "I've never thought of you as a writer."

"How have you thought of me, then?"

"Well, I don't know," she said, smiling. "How can I possibly say? I know you too well by now. . . . I know just what you're like. . . . You're the same for me, always—whether you write or don't write."

"But if you had to pronounce an opinion, what would it be?"

She hesitated, and then said, with sincerity: "But one can't pronounce an opinion when one loves."

And so we always came back again to the same point. There was, in this protestation of hers that she loved me, a touching persistence that moved me deeply. I took her hand and said: "You're right. . . . And I too, just because I love you, although I know you very well, couldn't pass judgment upon you."

With a flash of intelligence in her eyes, she exclaimed: "It is so, isn't it? When one loves someone, one loves every aspect of that person—defects and all."

I should have liked to say to her at that moment, with perfect sincerity: "I love you as you are now, sitting up in bed, calm and serene in your beautiful nightdress, with your curls and your bunch of flowers and your clear, shining eyes. And I love you as you were a little time ago when you were dancing the dance of desire and gnashing your teeth and pulling up your dress and clinging to Antonio. . . . And I shall love you always." But I said nothing of all this, because I realized that she understood that I knew everything and that everything was now settled between us. Instead, I said: "Perhaps one day I'll rewrite the story . . . It's not finished with yet. . . . Some day, when I think I'm capable of expressing certain things."

"I'm convinced too," she said cheerfully, "that you ought to rewrite it—after some time."

I kissed her good-night and went off to bed. I slept extremely well, with a deep, harsh sleep like the sleep of a child who has been beaten by its parents for some fault or caprice, and has screamed and wept a great deal and then, finally, been forgiven. Next morning I rose late, shaved myself and, after breakfast, suggested to my wife that we should go for a walk before lunch. She agreed and we went out together.

A little beyond the farm buildings, on the top of another mound, were the ruins of a small church. We climbed up to it by a mule-track and sat down on the low wall that ran round the churchyard, in full view of the vast panorama. The church was of great antiquity, as one could see from the Romanesque capitals of the two pillars supporting the exterior porch. Except for this porch, nothing was left but a portion of the walls, a fallen apse and the almost unrecognizable stump of a tower. The churchyard, paved with old gray stones, was all grass-grown, and beneath the little porch one could catch a glimpse, through the cracks in the gaping boards of the rustic door, of the rampant bushes, their foliage gleaming in the sunshine, that ran riot in the apse. Then, as I looked at the church, I noticed that there was a face or mask carved on one of the capitals. Time had worn and smoothed away the sculpture, which must have always been rather rudimentary and now seemed almost formless; not so much so, however, that one could not distinguish the sinister face of a demon such as the sculptors of those days were in the habit of portraying in church bas-reliefs for the admonish-ment of the faithful. I was suddenly struck by a remote resemblance between this ancient, half-effaced grin and the grimace that I had seen upon my wife's face the previous night. Yes, it was the same grimace, and that stonemason of bygone times had certainly intended, by stressing the mournful sensuality of the heavy lips and the feverish, greedy expression in the eyes, to suggest the same kind of temptation. I turned my eyes from the capital and looked at Leda. She was looking at the view and seemed to be meditating. Then she turned toward me and said: "Listen. . . . I was thinking last night about your story. I believe I know why it's not convincing."

"Why?"

"You meant to represent yourself and me, didn't you?"

"Yes, to a certain extent."

"Well, your facts were wrong, to start with. . . . What I mean is, one feels that when you wrote the story you didn't know me well enough, nor yourself either. . . . Perhaps it was too soon to talk about us two and our relationship . . . particularly about me; you haven't shown me as I really am. You've idealized me too much."

"Anything else?"

"No, nothing else. . . . I think that, after some time, when we know each other better, you must take up the story again, as you said last night. . . . I'm sure you'll make something good out of it."

I said nothing; all I did was to stroke her hand. And, as I did this, I was looking over her shoulder at the capital with the demon's face on it and thinking that, in order to take up the story again, I should have not merely to know the devil as well as the unknown stonemason had known him, but also to know his opposite. "It'll take a long time," I said softly, finishing my thought aloud.

A GHOST
AT NOON

TRANSLATED BY Angus Davidson

1

During the first two years of our married life my relations with my wife were, I can now assert, perfect. By which I mean to say that, in those two years, a complete, profound harmony of the senses was accompanied by a kind of numbness—or should I say silence?—of the mind which, in such circumstances, causes an entire suspension of judgment and looks only to love for any estimate of the beloved person. Emilia, in fact, seemed to me wholly without defects, and so also, I believe, I appeared to her. Or perhaps I saw her defects and she saw mine, but, through some mysterious transformation produced by the feeling of love, such defects appeared to us both not merely forgivable but even lovable, as though instead of defects they had been positive qualities, if of a rather special kind. Anyhow, we did not judge: we loved each other. This story sets out to relate how, while I continued to love her and not to judge her, Emilia, on the other hand, discovered, or thought she discovered, certain defects in me, and judged me and in consequence ceased to love me.

The less one notices happiness, the greater it is. It may seem strange, but in those two years I sometimes thought I was actually bored. Certainly, at the time, I did not realize that I was happy. It seemed to me that I was doing what everyone did—loving my wife and being loved by her; and this love of ours seemed to me an ordinary, normal fact, or rather, to be in no way precious—just like the air one breathes, and there's plenty of it and it becomes precious only when it begins to run short. If anyone had told me, at that time, that I was happy, I should even have been surprised; in all probability I should have answered that I was not happy because, although I loved my wife and she loved me, I felt a lack of security for the immediate future. This was true: we barely managed to grub along on what I earned, with great difficulty, as film critic on a daily paper of secondary importance, combined with other similar journalistic activities; we lived in a furnished room in a lodging-house; we often had no money for extras, sometimes not even for necessities. How could I be happy? Thus I never had so much to complain of as I did during the time when in truth—as I came to realize later—I was completely and profoundly happy.

At the end of those two first years of married life our situation at last improved: I got to know Battista, a film producer, and for him I wrote my first film-script—a job which, at the time, I considered to be merely a stopgap, particularly in relation to my more exalted literary ambitions, but which was fated, on the other hand, to become my profession. At the same time, however, my relations with Emilia began to change for the worse. My story, in fact, begins with my own first beginnings as a professional script-writer and with the deterioration of my relations with my wife—two occurrences that were almost simultaneous and, as will be seen, directly linked together.

Looking back, I am aware of having preserved a confused memory of an incident which appeared at the time to be irrelevant but to which, afterwards, I was forced to attribute a decisive importance. I see myself standing on the pavement of a street in the center of the town. Emilia, Battista and I had dined at a restaurant and Battista had suggested finishing the evening at his house and we had accepted. Now we were all three in front of Battista's car, a very expensive red car, but with a narrow body and only two seats. Battista, who was already sitting at the wheel, leaned over and opened the door, saying: "I'm sorry, but there's only room for one. You'll have to find your own way, Molteni . . . Unless you'd rather wait for me here: in that case I'll come back and fetch you." Emilia was beside me, in her black silk evening dress, the only one she had, a low-necked, sleeveless dress; and over her arm she was holding her fur cape: it was October and still warm. I looked at her, and for some reason noticed that her beauty, usually so serene and placid, had in it, that evening, a new kind of restlessness, almost a disturbed look. I said gaily: "Emilia, you go on with Battista . . . I'll follow in a taxi." Emilia looked at me and then answered slowly, in a reluctant tone of voice: "Wouldn't it be better for Battista to go on, and for us two to go together in the taxi?" Then Battista put his head out of the window of the car and exclaimed in a joking way: "You're a nice sort of person, you want me to go all alone." "It's not that," began Emilia, "but . . ." and then I suddenly noticed that her beautiful face, usually so calm and harmonious, was now darkened and, one might say, distorted by an almost painful perplexity. But in the meantime I had already said: "You're right, Battista; come on, Emilia, you go with him and I'll take a taxi." This time Emilia yielded, or rather, obeyed, and got into the car. But—a further sensation that comes back to me only now, as I write about it—once she was seated beside Battista, with the door of the car still open, she looked at me with a hesitating glance, a glance of mingled pleading and repugnance. I took no notice of my own sensation, however, and, with the decided gesture of one who closes the door of a safe, I slammed the heavy door. The car moved away, and I, feeling very cheerful and whistling to myself, started off towards the nearby taxi stand.

The producer's house was not far from the restaurant, and normally I should have reached it in a taxi, if not quite at the same time as Battista, at any rate very shortly afterwards. But what should happen, when we were half way there, but a mishap at a crossroads: the taxi ran into a private car, and both sustained some damage; the taxi had a fender scratched and bent, and the side of the other car was dented. At once the two drivers got out and faced each other, arguing and swearing, people collected, a policeman intervened and with some difficulty separated them, and finally names and addresses were taken. All this time I sat waiting inside the taxi, without impatience, in fact with a sensation almost of happiness, because I had had plenty of good food and drink and at the end of dinner Battista had proposed that I should take a share in the script of one of his films. But the collision and the subsequent explanations had lasted perhaps ten, perhaps fifteen minutes, and so I arrived late at Battista's. As I came into the sitting-room I saw Emilia sitting in an armchair, her legs crossed, and Battista standing in one corner in front of a bar on wheels. Battista greeted me gaily: Emilia, on the other hand, asked me, in a plaintive, almost melting, tone, where I had been all that time. I answered lightly that I had had an accident, realizing at the same time that I was adopting a tone of evasiveness, as if I had something to conceal: in reality it was simply the tone of one who attributes no importance to what he is saying. But Emilia persisted, still in that strange tone of voice: "An accident . . . what do you mean, an accident?"—and then I, surprised and perhaps even a little alarmed, gave an account of what had happened. This time, however, it seemed to me that I went into too many details, as though I were afraid of not being believed; and I was, in fact, aware of having made a slight mistake, first by being reticent and now by being over precise. Emilia, however, did not insist further; and Battista, full of laughter and affability, put down three glasses on the table and invited me to drink. I sat down; and so, chattering and making jokes —especially Battista and I—we passed a couple of hours. Battista was so exuberant and gay that I hardly noticed Emilia was not so, at all. In any case she was always rather silent and retiring, because she was shy, and so her reserve did not astonish me. I was only slightly surprised that she did not take part in the conversation at least with glances and smiles, as she usually did: but she did not smile or look at us; all she did was to smoke and drink in silence, as though she were alone. At the end of the evening, Battista talked to me seriously about the film in which I was to collaborate, telling me the story, giving me information about the director and about my fellow script-writer, and finally inviting me to come to his office next day in order to sign the contract. Emilia took the opportunity of a moment's silence, after this invitation, to rise to her feet and say that she was tired and wanted to go home. We said good night to Battista, we left the room and went downstairs to the ground floor and out into the street, and we walked along the street to a taxi stand, without speaking a word. We got in and the taxi moved off. I was wild with delight at Battista's unhoped-for proposal, and I could not help saying to Emilia: "This film-script comes just at the right moment. I don't know how we should have got along without it. I should have had to borrow money." Emilia's only reply was to ask: "How much do they pay for a script?" I told her the amount and added: "So our problems are solved, anyhow for next winter"; and as I spoke I put out my hand and took Emilia's. She allowed her hand to be pressed and did not say any more until we arrived home.

2

AFTER THAT EVENING, everything went, as far as my work was concerned, in the best possible way. I went next morning to see Battista, signed the contract for the script, and received my first advance of money. It was, I remember, a film of little importance, of the comic-sentimental type for which, serious-minded as I was, I did not imagine myself to be cut out, but which in fact showed me, as I worked on it, that I had an unsuspected vocation. That same day I had a first meeting with the director and also with my fellow script-writer.

While it is possible for me to indicate exactly the starting-point of my career as a script-writer, which was that evening at Battista's, it is very difficult for me to say with the same precision when my relations with my wife began to deteriorate. I could of course point to that same evening as the beginning of this deterioration; but that would be what is called being wise after the event; and all the more so because Emilia gave no sign, for some time afterwards, of any change in her demeanor towards me. The change certainly took place during the month which followed that evening, but I really could not say at what moment, in Emilia's mind, the decisive turn of the scale occurred, nor what caused this to happen. At that time we were seeing Battista almost every day, and I could relate, with an abundance of detail, many other episodes similar to that of the first evening in his house; episodes, that is, which were then in no way to be distinguished—to my eyes, anyhow—from the general color of my life, but which later acquired some special prominence or meaning. There is just one fact I wish to note: every time Battista invited us, which now happened very often, Emilia always showed, at first, a certain reluctance to go with me, not a strong nor a very decided reluctance, it is true, but curiously persistent in its expression and in its justifications. She always adduced some pretext or other that had nothing to do with Battista in order not to come with us; always, in the same way, I proved to her without any difficulty that the pretext did not hold good, and insisted on trying to find out whether she disliked Battista, or what her reason was; always, in the end, her answer to my question, given with a slight touch of perplexity, was that she did not in the least dislike Battista, that she had no fault to find with him, and that she did not want to go out with us simply because these evenings tired her and, really and truly, bored her. I was not content with these vague explanations and returned to my point, hinting that something must have happened between her and Battista, even though Battista himself was not conscious of it, or had not intended it. But, the more I tried to prove to her that she did not like Battista, the more she seemed to persevere in her denial: her perplexity, in the end, disappeared altogether, and its place was taken by a wilful obstinacy and determination. Then, completely reassured with regard to her feelings towards Battista and Battista's demeanor towards her, I went on to point out to her the reasons that told so strongly in favor of her giving us her company on these occasions: how hitherto I had never gone out without her, and Battista knew it; how her presence gave pleasure to Battista, as was shown by his urging, every time he invited us: "Of course, bring your wife"; how her absence, unexpected and difficult to justify as it was, might appear ill-natured, or, even worse, insulting to Battista, upon whom our living now depended; how, when all was said and done, since she was unable to show any valid reason for her absence whereas I was in a position to give many excellent reasons for her presence, it was preferable that she should put up with the fatigue and boredom required of her. Emilia usually listened to these arguments of mine with a dreamy and contemplative attention: it might have been thought that it was not so much the reasons themselves as my face and my gestures while expounding them that interested her; then, in the end, she would invariably give in and start silently dressing to go out. At the last moment, when she was ready to go, I would ask her, once more and for the last time, if she really disliked coming with me—not so much because by now I was doubtful of her answer, as in order to leave her no doubts about her freedom of decision. She would answer, in a categorical manner, that she did not dislike going, and then, out we would go.

All this, however, I reconstructed later, as I have already mentioned, patiently retracing in memory a number of occurrences which—at least at the time—had seemed insignificant, and which had passed almost unobserved by me at the moment when they took place. At that time I had been aware merely of a change for the worse in Emilia's demeanor towards me, but without explaining or defining it to myself in any way; in the same way one becomes conscious, through a change and a heaviness in the air, of the approach of a thunderstorm though the sky is still serene. I began to think she loved me less than in the past, because I noticed that she was no longer so anxious to be near me as in the first times after our marriage. In those days I would say: "Look, I've got to go out; I'll be out for a couple of hours but I'll come back as soon as I can"; and she would not protest, but she showed, by her expression of mingled sadness and resignation, that she did not like my being away. So much so, indeed, that often I either gave up going out, excusing myself somehow from my engagement; or, if possible, took her with me. Her attachment to me then was so strong that one day, when she had gone with me to the station from which I was to leave for a very brief trip to North Italy, I saw her, as we were saying good-bye, turn her face to hide the tears that filled her eyes. That time I pretended not to notice her grief; but during the whole journey I was haunted by remorse for that shamefaced but uncontrollable weeping; and from then onwards I ceased completely to travel without her. But now, instead of assuming the usual, beloved expression with its slight suggestion of mortification and sadness, all she would do, if I announced that I was going out, was to answer calmly, often without even looking up from the book she was reading: "All right, I understand; then we'll see each other at dinner. Don't be late." Sometimes she seemed actually to want my absence to last longer than I myself intended. I would say to her, for instance: "I've got to go out. I'll be back at five"; and she would answer: "Stay out as long as you like . . . I've got things to do." One day I remarked in a light tone of voice that she seemed almost to prefer that I shouldn't be there; but she made no direct answer, merely saying that, since I was busy, one way and another, almost all day, it was just as well that we shouldn't meet except at mealtimes, and so she would be able to get through her own jobs in peace. This was only partly true: my work as a scriptwriter obliged me to be out of the house only in the afternoons; and hitherto I had always arranged matters so that I could spend the rest of the day with her. From that day onwards, however, I took to going out in the morning as well.

In the days when Emilia gave me to understand that my absences were displeasing to her, I used to leave the house with a light heart, well content, in reality, at her displeasure, as being yet another proof of the great love she felt for me. But as soon as I became aware that not merely did she show no disappointment, but even seemed to prefer to be left alone, I began to experience an obscure feeling of distress, as if I had felt the ground give way beneath my feet. I went out now not only in the afternoons to go and work at the film-script, but in the mornings too, as I said, and often without any other purpose than to test Emilia's indifference, so utterly new and, to me, so bitter; and yet she did not show the slightest displeasure, in fact she accepted my absences with placidity if not actually—so it seemed to me—with ill-disguised relief. At first I tried to console myself for this coldness by arguing that, after two years of marriage, habit, even though it may be an affectionate habit, creeps into love with fatal effect, and the assurance of being loved takes away all character of passion from a married couple's relationship. Yet I felt that this was not true: I felt it rather than thought it, for thought is always more fallible, even in its apparent preciseness, than obscure, confused feeling. I felt, in fact, that Emilia had ceased to be displeased at my absences, not because she considered them inevitable and without consequence to our relationship, but because she loved me less, or indeed not at all. I also felt that something, without doubt, must have happened to change her feeling, which had once been so tender and so possessive.

3

AT THE TIME when I first met Battista, I found myself in an extremely difficult situation, and I did not know how to escape from it. My difficulty consisted in my having at that time acquired the lease of a flat, although I had not the money to complete my payment for it and did not know how I should be able to get the money. We had lived, Emilia and I, during our first two years, in a large furnished room in a lodging-house. Any other woman but Emilia would perhaps not have put up with this provisional arrangement; but, in the case of Emilia, I think that, by accepting it, she gave me the greatest proof of love that a devoted wife can give to a husband. Emilia was, indeed, what is called a born housewife; but in her love of home there was more than the natural inclination common to all women; I mean that there was something that resembled a deep, jealous passion, almost a hunger, which went beyond her own self and seemed to derive its origin from some ancestral situation. She came of a poor family; she herself, when I first came to know her, was working as a typist; and I think that her love of home was an unconscious means of expression for the frustrated aspirations of generations of disinherited people who were chronically incapable of setting up an abode of their own, however modest. I do not know whether she was under the illusion that, with our marriage, her dreams of domesticity would come true; but I remember that one of the few times I ever saw her weep was when I was forced to confess, shortly after we became engaged, that I was not yet in a position to provide her with a home of her own, even a rented one, and that we must be content, at first, with a furnished room. It seemed to me that those tears, quickly suppressed as they were, were an outward expression not only of bitter disappointment at seeing her cherished dream thrust away into the future, but also of the actual power of that dream, which for her was, as it were, more a reason for living than just a dream.

And so we lived, those first two years, in a furnished room; but how meticulously tidy and bright and clean Emilia always kept it! It was obvious that, as far as possible—and in a furnished room it is possible only to a limited degree—she wanted to deceive herself into believing that she had a home of her own; and that, lacking her own household furniture, she wanted at least to infuse her own concentrated domestic spirit into the lodging-house keeper's shabby utensils. There were always flowers in a vase on my desk; my papers were always arranged with loving, inviting orderliness, as though to encourage me to work and guarantee me the greatest possible privacy and quietness; the tea service always stood ready on a small table, with napkins and a box of crackers; never was an undergarment or other intimate object to be found where it should not be, on the floor or the chairs, as so often happens in similar cramped, temporary abodes. After the first hurried cleaning by the servant-girl, Emilia would subject the whole room to a second, more scrupulous, personal cleaning, so that everything which could shine and reflect *did* shine and reflect, even the smallest brass knob on the window-frame or the least visible strip of wood on the floor; at night, she insisted on preparing the bed herself, without the help of the maid, laying out her own muslin nightgown on one side and my pyjamas on the other and carefully turning down the sheets and arranging the twin pillows; in the morning she would get up before me, and, going to the lodging-house keeper's kitchen, would prepare the breakfast and bring it to me herself, on a tray. She did all these things in silence, discreetly, without drawing attention to herself, but with an intensity, a concentration, an eager, absorbed solicitude that betrayed a passion too deep to be openly proclaimed. Nevertheless, in spite of these pathetic efforts on her part, the furnished room remained just a furnished room; and the illusion that she sought to create for herself and for me was never complete. And then, from time to time, in moments of excessive weariness or discouragement, she would complain—gently, it is true, and almost placidly, in accordance with her character, but not without evident bitterness—asking me how long this provisional, this inferior, way of living would have to continue. I was aware that it was a real sorrow that lay behind this very moderate expression of displeasure; and I worried myself with the thought that, sooner or later, I would somehow have to satisfy her.

In the end I decided, as I said, to buy the lease of a flat; not because I had the means to do so, for such means were still lacking, but because I understood how she was suffering and how her suffering would perhaps some day overcome her powers of endurance. I had put aside a small sum of money during those two years; to this sum I added some more money which I had obtained on loan; and so I was able to pay the first instalment. In doing this I did not, however, experience the joyful feelings of a man preparing a home for his bride; on the contrary, I was anxious and seriously distressed, because I did not know in the least how I would manage when, a few months later, the time came to pay the second instalment. At that time, in fact, I was so desperate that I had almost a feeling of rancor against Emilia, who, by the tenacity of her passion, had in a way forced me to take this imprudent and dangerous step.

However, the profound joy of Emilia when I announced that the matter was settled, and later the unaccustomed feelings—strange, to me, both in their quality and their intensity—which she displayed on the day we went for the first time into the still unfurnished flat, made me for some time forget my troubles. I have said that, with Emilia, love of home had all the characteristics of a passion; and I must add that, on this occasion, that same passion appeared to me to be bound up with, and mingled with, sensuality, as though the fact of having at last acquired a flat for her had made me, in her eyes, not merely more lovable but also, in a wholly physical sense, closer and more intimate. We had gone to inspect the place, and Emilia, to begin with, walked round all the cold, empty rooms with me while I explained the purpose of each of them and the way in which I thought to arrange the furniture. But, at the end of our visit, as I was walking over to a window with the intention of opening it and showing her the view to be enjoyed from it, she came close up to me and, pressing her whole body against me, whispered to me to give her a kiss. This was quite a new thing for her, usually so discreet, so almost shy, in any expression of love. Excited by this novelty and by the tone of her voice, I kissed her as she wanted; and all the time the kiss lasted—certainly one of the most violent and most abandoned we ever exchanged—I felt her clinging more and more closely with her body against mine, as though inviting me to greater intimacy; and then, wildly, she tore off her skirt, unbuttoned her chemise, and thrust her belly against mine. The kiss over, in a very low voice that was like an inarticulate breath and yet was melodious, melting, she murmured in my ear—or at least so it seemed to me—that I should take her; and meanwhile, with all the weight of her body, she was pulling me down towards the floor. We made love on the floor, on the dusty tiles, under the sill of the window I had meant to open. Yet in the ardor of that embrace, so unrestrained and so unusual, I was conscious not only of the love she felt for me at that time, but more particularly of the outpouring of her repressed passion for a home, which in her expressed itself quite naturally through the channel of unforeseen sensuality. In that embrace, in fact, consummated on that dirty floor, in the chilly gloom of the empty flat, she was giving herself, so I felt, to the giver of the home, not the husband. And those bare, echoing rooms, still smelling of paint and fresh plaster, had stirred something in the innermost recesses of her heart that no caress of mine, hitherto, had ever had the power to awaken.

Between our visit to the empty flat and the day of our entry into it a couple of months went by, during which the necessary contracts were drawn up, all in Emilia's name, because I knew that this gave her pleasure; while we also collected together the small amount of furniture that, with my very limited means, I could afford to buy. Meanwhile, when the first feeling of satisfaction was over, I felt, as I have mentioned, extremely anxious about the future, and, at moments, positively desperate. I was earning enough by now, it is true, for us to live in a modest manner and even put aside a few pennies; but these savings were certainly not sufficient to pay the next instalment on the flat. My desperation was all the more acute inasmuch as I could not even have the relief of talking about it to Emilia: I did not wish to spoil her pleasure. But I recall that time as a period of great anxiety and, in a way, of diminished love for Emilia. Indeed I could not help realizing that she was not in the least worried to know how I had managed to come by so much money, although she knew our real position perfectly well. This thought was vaguely surprising to me, and there were moments when it inspired me almost with irritation against her—she who now, all busy and cheerful, thought of nothing but going round the shops looking for things to furnish the flat, and who every day, in her most placid tone of voice, announced some new acquisition. I wondered how it came about that she, who loved me so much, failed to guess at the cruel anxieties that oppressed me; but I realized that, probably, she thought that if I had bought the lease of the flat I had no doubt also taken steps to procure the necessary money. Nevertheless her serenity and satisfaction seemed to me, in contrast to my own wretched worries, to be a sign of selfishness, or, at the least, of insensibility.

I was so troubled at that period that even the image I had hitherto made of myself in my own mind had changed. Up till then I had looked upon myself as an intellectual, a man of culture, a writer for the theater—the "art" theater, I mean —for which I had always had a great passion and to which I felt I was drawn by a natural vocation. This *moral* image, as I may call it, also had an influence on the *physical* image; I saw myself as a young man whose thinness, short sight, nervousness, pallor and carelessness in dress all bore witness, in anticipation, of the literary glory for which I was destined. But at that time, under the pressure of my cruel anxieties, this very promising and flattering picture had given place to an entirely different one, that of a poor devil who had been caught in a shabby, pathetic trap, who had not been able to resist his love for his wife and had over-reached himself and would be forced to struggle, for goodness knows how much longer, in the mortifying toils of poverty. I saw myself changed in my physical aspect as well: I was no longer the young and still unknown theatrical genius, I was the starving journalist, the contributor to cheap reviews and second-rate newspapers; or perhaps—even worse—the scraggy employee of some private company or government office. This man hid his anxieties from his wife, so as not to worry her; he ran about the town all day long, looking for work and often not finding any; he would wake up in the night with a start, thinking of the debts that had to be paid; in fact, he no longer thought of, or saw, anything but money. It was a touching picture, perhaps, but lacking in luster and dignity, the picture of a wretched, conventional literary figure, and I hated it because I thought that, slowly and insensibly, with the years, I should end by resembling it, in spite of myself. But there it was: I had not married a woman who could understand and share my ideas, tastes and ambitions; instead I had married, for her beauty, an uncultivated, simple typist, full, it seemed to me, of all the prejudices and ambitions of the class from which she came. With the first I could have faced the discomforts of a poverty stricken, disorganized life, in a studio or a furnished room, in expectation of the theatrical successes that were bound to come; but for the second I had had to provide the home of her dreams. And at the cost, I thought in desperation, of having to renounce, perhaps for ever, my precious literary ambitions.

There was another factor which contributed at that time to increase my feeling of anguish and impotence in face of material difficulties. I felt that the metal of my spirit, like a bar of iron that is softened and bent by a persistent flame, was being gradually softened and bent by the troubles that oppressed it. In spite of myself, I was conscious of a feeling of envy for those who did not suffer from such troubles, for the wealthy and the privileged; and this envy, I observed, was accompanied—still against my will—by a feeling of bitterness towards them, which, in turn, did not limit its aim to particular persons or situations, but, as if by an uncontrollable bias, tended to assume the general, abstract character of a whole conception of life. In fact, during those difficult days, I came very gradually to feel that my irritation and my intolerance of poverty were turning into a revolt against injustice, and not only against the injustice which struck at me personally but the injustice from which so many others like me suffered. I was quite aware of this almost imperceptible transformation of my subjective resentments into objective reflections and states of mind, owing to the bent of my thoughts which led always and irresistibly in the same direction: owing also to my conversation, which, without my intending it, always harped upon the same subject. I also noticed in myself a growing sympathy for those political parties which proclaimed their struggle against the evils and infamies of the society to which, in the end, I had attributed the troubles that beset me—a society which, as I thought, in reference to myself, allowed its best sons to languish and protected its worst ones. Usually, and in simpler, less cultivated people, this process occurs without their knowing it, in the dark depths of consciousness where, by a kind of mysterious alchemy, egoism is transmuted into altruism, hatred into love, fear into courage; but to me, accustomed as I was to observing and studying myself, the whole thing was clear and visible, as though I were watching it happen in someone else; and yet I was aware the whole time that I was being swayed by material, subjective factors, that I was transforming purely personal motives into universal reasons. I had never wished to become a member of any political party, as almost everyone did during that uneasy period after the war, just because it seemed to me that I could not take part in politics, as so many did, for personal motives, but only from intellectual conviction, which, however, I had so far lacked; and I was therefore very angry when I felt my ideas, my conversation, my whole demeanor going very gradually adrift on the current of my own interests, slowly changing color according to the difficulties of the moment. "So I'm really just like everyone else," I thought furiously; "does it only need an empty purse to make me dream, like so many other people, of the rebirth of humanity?" But it was an impotent fury; and one day when I felt more desperate or less firm than usual, I let myself be convinced by a friend who had been hovering around me for some time, and became a member of the Communist party. Immediately afterwards I reflected that, once again, I had behaved, not like the young, unrecognized genius, but like the starving journalist or the scraggy employee into which I was so terrified that time would transform me. But the thing was done now, I was inside the party and I could not draw back again. Emilia's reception of the news of the step I had taken was characteristic: "But now only the Communists will give you work . . . the others will boycott you." I had not the courage to tell her what I was thinking —which was that, in all probability, I should never have become a Communist if I had not bought the lease of that over-expensive flat, in order to give her pleasure. And that was the end of it.

At last we moved in, and the very next day, by a coincidence that seemed to me providential, I met Battista, and, as I have already related, was at once invited by him to work on the script of one of his films. For some time I felt relieved and more cheerful than I had been for many weeks: I thought I would do four or five film-scripts to pay off the lease of the flat, and then devote myself again to journalism and my beloved theater. Meanwhile my love for Emilia had come back to me stronger than ever, and sometimes I went so far as to reproach myself, with the bitterest remorse, for having been capable of thinking ill of her and judging her to be selfish and insensitive. This brief bright interval, however, lasted only a very short time. Almost immediately the sky of my life clouded over again. But at first it was only an exceedingly small cloud, though of a decidedly gloomy color.

4

My meeting with Battista took place on the first Monday in October. The day before, we had moved into the flat, which was now completely furnished. This flat, the cause, to me, of so many anxieties, was in truth neither large nor luxurious. It had only two rooms—a big living-room, of greater length than width, and a bedroom, also of good proportions. The bathroom, the kitchen and the maid's room were all three very small—reduced, as always in modern buildings, to the smallest possible size. Besides this there was a little windowless box which Emilia intended to make into a dressing-room. The flat was on the top floor of a newly built block, as smooth and white as if it had been all made of plaster, in a narrow, slightly sloping street. The whole of one side of the street was occupied by a row of buildings similar to ours, while along the other side ran the boundary wall of the garden of a private villa, with branches of great leafy trees hanging over it. It was a beautiful view, as I pointed out to Emilia, and we could almost delude ourselves into thinking that this garden, in which we could catch glimpses of winding paths and fountains and open spaces, was not cut off from us by a street and a wall, and that we could go down and walk about in it as often as we liked.

We moved in during the afternoon. I was busy the whole day, and I do not remember where we dined, nor with whom; I only remember that, towards midnight, I was standing in the middle of the bedroom in front of the triple looking-glass, looking at myself and slowly undoing my tie. All at once, in the mirror, I saw Emilia take a pillow from the double bed and go off towards the door of the living-room. Surprised, I asked: "What are you doing?"

I had spoken without moving. Still in the mirror, I saw her stop in the doorway and turn, as she said in a casual tone: "You won't mind, will you, if I sleep on the divan bed, in the other room?"

"Just for tonight, you mean?" I inquired, puzzled and still uncomprehending.

"No, for always," she replied hurriedly. "To tell you the truth, that was one of the reasons why I wanted a new home. I really can't go on sleeping with the shutters open, as you like to do. I wake up every morning at the crack of dawn and then I can't go to sleep again, and I go about all day long with a sleepy feeling in my head. You don't mind, do you? I do think it's really better for us to sleep separate."

I still failed to understand, and at first I felt no more than vaguely irritated at an innovation so completely unexpected. Walking across to her, I said: "But this can't go on. We've only two rooms; in one there's the bed, and in the other, the armchairs and divans. Why . . .? Besides, sleeping on a divan, even if it can be turned into a bed, is not very comfortable!"

"I never dared tell you, before," she answered, lowering her eyes without looking at me.

"During these two years," I persisted, "you've never once complained . . . I thought you'd got accustomed to it."

She raised her head, pleased, it seemed to me, that I had taken up the point of the excuse she had made. "I've never got accustomed to it . . . I've always slept badly . . . recently, in fact, perhaps because my nerves are bad nowadays, I've hardly been sleeping at all . . . If we could only go to bed early; but, one way or another, we're always late . . . and then . . ." She did not finish her sentence and made as if to move away towards the living-room. I went after her and said hastily: "Wait a minute. If you like, we can perfectly well give up sleeping with the shutters open. It's all right—from now on we'll sleep with them shut."

I realized, as I spoke, that this proposal was not merely a demonstration of affectionate compliance; in reality, as I knew, I wanted to put her to the test. I saw her shake her head, and she answered, with a faint smile: "No, no . . . why should you sacrifice yourself? You've always said you feel suffocated with the shutters closed. It's better for us to sleep apart."

"I assure you, for me it will be a very slight sacrifice . . . I shall soon get used to it."

She appeared to hesitate and then said, with unexpected firmness: "No, I don't want any sacrifices—either great or small . . . I shall sleep in the other room."

"And what if I say I don't like it, and that I want you to sleep with me?"

She hesitated again. Then, in the good-natured tone which was usual to her: "Riccardo, that's just like you. You didn't want to make this sacrifice two years ago, when we got married; and now you want to make it, at all costs. What's the matter with you? Plenty of married people sleep apart and are fond of each other just the same. And you'll be freer in the mornings, too, when you have to go to work; you won't wake me up any more."

"But you've just said you always woke at dawn . . . I don't leave the house at dawn! . . ."

"Oh, how pig-headed you are!" she exclaimed impatiently.

And this time, without paying any more attention to me, she left the room.

Left alone, I sat down on the bed, which, despoiled of one of its pillows, already had about it a suggestion of separation and desertion, and so I remained for some moments in bewilderment, looking at the open door through which Emilia had disappeared. One question came into my mind: did Emilia not want to sleep with me any longer because the daylight really annoyed her, or simply because she did not want to go on sleeping with me? I was inclined to believe in the second of these alternatives, although I longed with all my heart to believe in the first. I felt, however, that if I had accepted Emilia's explanation, there would always have been a doubt in my mind. I did not admit it to myself, but the final question, in reality, was, "Has Emilia perhaps ceased to love me?"

In the meantime, while, absorbed in these thoughts, I sat looking about the room, Emilia was coming and going, carrying into the living-room, after the pillow, a pair of folded sheets that she took from the cupboard, a blanket, a dressing-gown. It was the beginning of October, and the weather was still mild, and she was going about the flat in a gauzy, transparent chemise. I have not yet described Emilia, but I should like to do so now, if only in order to explain my feelings that night. She was perhaps not really a tall woman, but to me, owing to the feeling that I had for her, she seemed taller and, above all, more majestic than any woman I had ever known. I could not say whether this look of majesty was innate in her or whether it was my own ravished glances that attributed it to her; I only remember that, on the first night after our wedding, when she had taken off her high-heeled shoes, I went up to her in the middle of the room and embraced her, and was vaguely surprised when I noticed that her forehead barely came up to the top of my chest and that I was taller than her by a head and shoulders. But later, when she was lying beside me on the bed, there was a further surprise: her naked body now looked to me big, ample, powerful, although I knew that, in reality, she was not in the least massive. She had the most beautiful shoulders, the most beautiful arms, the most beautiful neck I had ever seen, full and rounded, shapely in form and languid in movement. Her complexion was dark, her nose pronounced and in form severe; her mouth full and fresh and laughing, with two rows of teeth of a luminous whiteness which seemed always to be wet and gleaming with saliva; her eyes very large, of a fine golden brown, sensual in expression, and sometimes, in moments of abandon, strangely relaxed and dazed-looking. She had not, as I have already said, a really beautiful figure; and yet she appeared to have—for some reason that I cannot explain; perhaps because of the supple slenderness of her waist which emphasized the form of her hips and breast; perhaps because of her erect, dignified carriage; perhaps because of the youthful boldness and vigour of her long, straight, well-shaped legs. She had, in fact, an air of grace and of placid, unconscious, spontaneous majesty such as comes from nature alone, and which, on that account, appears all the more mysterious and indefinable.

And so that evening, as she went backwards and forwards between the bedroom and the living-room, and as I followed her with my eyes, not knowing what to say, and feeling at the same time both displeased and embarrassed, my glance travelled from her serene face to her body, which was more or less visible through the thin stuff of her chemise, its colors and contours being veiled and broken up by its folds; and suddenly, the suspicion that she no longer loved me sprang into my mind again, in an abrupt, haunting sort of way, as a feeling of the impossibility of contact and communion between my body and hers. It was a sensation I had never felt before, and for a moment I was stunned and at the same time incredulous. Love is certainly, and before all else, a matter of feeling; but it is also, in an ineffable, almost spiritual manner, a communion of bodies—that communion, indeed, which up till then I had enjoyed without being conscious of it, as something obvious and completely natural. And now, as if my eyes had been at last opened to a fact which was clear and yet, till that moment, invisible, I was conscious that this communion might no longer exist between us, in fact, no longer did exist. And I, like a person who suddenly realizes he is hanging over an abyss, felt a kind of painful nausea at the thought that our intimacy had turned, for no reason at all, into estrangement, absence, separation.

I came to a pause at this staggering notion; meanwhile Emilia, who had gone into the bathroom, was washing, as I could tell from the sounds of water flowing from taps. I had an acute feeling of impotence and, at the same time, a violent desire to overcome it as quickly as possible. So far I had loved Emilia both easily and ignorantly; and my love had always manifested itself as if by enchantment, with a thoughtless, impetuous, inspired impulse which hitherto had seemed to me to spring from myself and from myself alone. Now, for the first time, I realized that this impulse depended upon, and nourished itself upon, a similar impulse in Emilia, and, seeing her so changed, I feared that I should no longer be capable of loving her with the same ease and spontaneity and naturalness. I feared, in fact, that that admirable communion, of which I had only now become aware, would be succeeded by, on my side, an act of cold imposition, and on hers . . . I did not know what her attitude would be, but I felt intuitively that if, on my side there was imposition, on hers there could only be a non-participating passivity, if not worse.

At that moment Emilia passed close to me as she came and went about the room. I leant forward with an almost involuntary lunge and seized her by the arm, saying: "Come here . . . I want to talk to you."

Her immediate reaction was to draw away from me, then, next moment, she yielded and came and sat down on the bed, though at some distance from me. "Talk to me? What do you want to talk to me about?"

For some reason or other, my throat now felt choked by sudden anxiety. Or perhaps it was shyness—a feeling which had hitherto been absent from our relationship and which, more than anything else, seemed to confirm the change that had taken place in it. "Yes," I said, "I want to talk to you; I have an impression that something has changed between us."

She threw me a rapid, sideways glance and answered with decision: "I don't understand you . . . what do you mean, changed? Nothing's changed."

"I haven't changed, but you have!"

"I haven't changed in the least. I'm still just the same."

"You used to love me more. You used to be sorry if I left you alone when I went out. You used not to mind sleeping with me then . . . on the contrary."

"Ah, that's what it's all about," she exclaimed, but I noticed that her tone was less assured; "I knew you would think something like that . . . But why don't you stop tormenting yourself like this? I don't want to sleep with you, merely because I want to sleep, and with you I can never manage to—that's all."

Now, strangely, I felt that arguments and ill-humor were melting quickly away and dissolving into nothingness, like wax at the fire: she was sitting beside me, in that vaporous, crumpled chemise through which it seemed that only the most intimate and secret colors and forms of her body were visible; and I desired her and felt it strange that she should not be aware of it and should not stop talking and embrace me, as had always happened in the past at the mere meeting of our disturbed glances. On the other hand, this feeling of desire made me hope not only that I should be drawn with the old, irresistible force towards her, but also that I should arouse in her a similar impulse towards me. I said, in a very low voice: "If nothing's changed, prove it to me."

"But I prove it to you every day, every hour!"

"No, now."

As I said this, I leant forward and took hold of her almost violently by the hair and tried to bend her head back to kiss her. Obediently she allowed herself to be drawn towards me, but at the last moment she avoided my kiss by a slight movement of her head, so that my lips could only reach her neck. Letting her go, I said: "Don't you want me to kiss you?"

"It's not that," she murmured, rearranging her hair with characteristically wayward indolence; "if it was just one kiss, I would willingly give it you. But then you go on . . . and it's late already . . ."

I felt hurt by these prudent, discouraging words. "It's never too late for such things," I said.

Meanwhile I was trying to kiss her again, pulling her towards me by the arm. "Ow," she cried out, "you're hurting me!"

Now I had scarcely touched her, and I remembered how, at the time when we loved each other, I had sometimes clasped her violently in my arms without drawing so much as a sigh from her. Irritated, I said: "In the old days it didn't hurt you!"

"You've got hands like iron," she replied; "you don't realize . . . You must have left marks on me now!" All this was said in an indolent sort of way, but without the slightest coquettishness.

"Come on," I insisted sharply, "are you going to give me that kiss, or not?"

"Here you are"; and she leant forward and, in a motherly way, flicked me a light kiss on the brow. "And now let me go to bed; it's late."

I did not intend to put up with that; and I took hold of her again, with both hands, just below the waist. "Emilia," I said, leaning towards her as she drew herself away, "that's not the kiss I wanted from you."

She thrust me away, saying once again, but now in a distinctly rough tone of voice: "Oh, let me alone . . . you hurt me!"

"It's not true, it can't be true," I muttered between my clenched teeth, throwing myself upon her.

This time she disengaged herself with two or three energetic, simple movements; then rose to her feet and, as if suddenly making up her mind, said, without any show of modesty: "If you want to make love, all right then . . . But don't hurt me; I can't bear to feel myself squeezed like that!"

I was left breathless. Her tone was now utterly cold, I could not help noticing, and practical, without the faintest touch of feeling in it. For a moment I sat quite still on the bed, my hands clasped, my head bent. Then her voice reached me again: "Well then, if you really want to, let's get on with it . . . shall we?"

Without raising my head, I said in a low voice: "Yes, I want to." It was not true, for by this time I no longer desired her, but I wished to endure this new, curious sense of estrangement to the bitter end. I heard her say "all right," and then I heard her walking about the room and moving around the bed behind me. All she had to do was to take off her chemise, I thought, and I recalled how in the past I had watched this simple act with enchanted eyes, like the brigand in the fairy-tale who, when the magic word had been uttered, saw the door of the cave slowly open, revealing the splendor of the marvelous treasures within. But this time I was unwilling to look, knowing that I should be looking with different eyes, eyes that were no longer childish and pure, even if desirous, but that had been, by her indifference, made cruel and unworthy both of her and of myself. I remained as I was, leaning forward, my hands in my lap, my head bowed. After a little I heard the springs of the bed creak gently; she had got on to the bed and was lying on top of the bed-clothes. There was again a slight rustling as though she were changing position, and then she said, still in that horrible new voice: "Well, come along then . . . what are you waiting for?"

I neither turned nor moved; but all of a sudden I wondered whether it had always been like that, in our relationship. Yes, I said to myself at once, it had always been like that, more or less; she had always undressed and lain down on the bed: how else could it have been? And yet, at the same time, everything had been different. Never until now had there been this mechanical docility, cold and detached, such as was apparent from the tone of her voice and even from the creaking of the bed-springs and the rustling of the pressed-down bed-covers. Formerly everything, on the contrary, had happened in a cloud of inspired haste, of intoxicated unconsciousness, of ravished complicity. It happens sometimes, when one's mind is absorbed by some profound thought, that one puts down an object of some kind—a book, a brush, a shoe—somewhere or other, and then, when the fit of absorption is over, one looks for it in vain for hours and, in the end, finds it in some strange, almost unbelievable place, so that a physical effort is required to reach it—on top of a cupboard, in a hidden corner, inside a drawer. That is what had happened to me, hitherto, in relation to love-making. Everything had always run its course in a mood of swift, feverish, enchanted absorption, and I had always come to myself again in Emilia's arms almost without being able to recollect how it had all happened and what I had done between the moment when we were sitting opposite each other, quiet and without desire, and that other moment in which we were joined together in the final embrace. This absorption was now entirely lacking in her and therefore in me also. Now, I could have observed her movements with a cold, even if excited, eye, just as she, no doubt, could have observed mine. All of a sudden, the feeling which was becoming clearer and clearer in my furious, disgusted mind took on the character of a precise image: I was no longer face to face with the wife I loved and who loved me, but with a rather impatient and inexpert prostitute who was preparing to submit passively to my embraces hoping only that they would be brief and not too tiring. I had this image right before my eyes for a moment, like an aparition, and then I felt that it went, so to speak, around behind my back and became one with Emilia lying behind me on the bed. At the same moment I rose to my feet, still without turning around, and said: "Never mind . . . I don't want to, now . . . I'll go and sleep in the other room; you stay here"; then, on tiptoe, I went to the door of the living-room.

The divan bed was ready, with the sheet turned down and Emilia's nightdress laid out on top with the sleeves spread wide. I took this nightdress, the slippers she had placed on the floor, and the dressing-gown she had arranged on an armchair, went back into the bedroom and put them all down on one of the chairs there. But this time I could not help raising my eyes and looking at her. She was still in the attitude she had taken up when she lay down on the bed and called to me: “Come along then.” She was lying quite naked, with one arm behind her neck and her head turned towards me, her eyes wide open but indifferent and as it were unseeing, and the other arm lying across her body so that her sex was covered by her hand. But now, it seemed to me, she was no longer the prostitute; she had now become a semblance in a mirage, with a haze of impossibility, of nostalgia, about her, and infinitely remote, as though she were not only a few paces away from me but in some far-off region, outside reality and outside my personal feelings.

5

I CERTAINLY HAD A PRESENTIMENT that evening that a period full of difficulties was beginning for me, but, strange to say, I did not infer from Emilia's behavior the results that might have been expected. There was no doubt that she had shown herself cold and indifferent, and it was perfectly true that I should rather have renounced love altogether than obtain it in that way. But I loved her, and love has a great capacity not only for illusion but also for forgetfulness. Next day—I don't know how—the incident of the previous evening, which later on was to appear so full of significance to me, had already lost, in my eyes, much of its importance, losing its burden of hostility and reducing itself to an insignificant divergence of opinion. The truth is that one easily forgets what one does not want to remember; and furthermore I think that Emilia herself contributed to my forgetfulness, for a few days later, though she still insisted on sleeping alone, she did not refuse my love. It is true that on this occasion she again behaved in the cold, passive manner which had previously roused me to revolt; but, as often happens, what had seemed intolerable to me on that first evening seemed, a few days later, to be not only tolerable but even flattering. I was already, in fact, without being aware of it, in the slippery region where the coldness of the day before becomes, a day later—thanks to false arguments and the goodwill of a mind in need of illusion—warm-hearted love. I had thought that Emilia, that first evening, had behaved like a prostitute; but less than a week afterwards I consented to love her and be loved by her in exactly that way; and since, in the obscure depths of my mind, I had perhaps feared that she really did not want me any more, I was grateful to her for her cold, impatient passivity just as though it had been the normal attitude in our sexual relations.

But, if I continued to delude myself that Emilia still loved me as in the past, or rather, if I preferred not to put the question of our love to myself, there was one thing which betrayed the state of my heart towards the change that had come about between us. That was my work. I had, for the time being, given up my theatrical ambitions and devoted myself to the cinema, simply in order to satisfy Emilia's longing to possess a home of her own. As long as I had been sure that Emilia loved me, the work of script-writer did not seem to me too onerous; but after the incident of that evening it seemed to me that a subtle feeling of discouragement, of restlessness, of repugnance had crept into it. In reality—as I have already said—I had accepted this job just as I would have accepted any other, even more uncongenial and even farther removed from my own interests, merely out of love for Emilia. Now that this love was on the point of failing me, the work lost its meaning and justification and acquired, in my eyes, the absurd character of sheer slavery.

I want to say a few words about the job of script-writer, if only to give a better understanding of my feelings at that time. As everyone knows, the script-writer is the one who—generally in collaboration with another script-writer and with the director—writes the script or scenario, that is, the canvas from which the film will later be taken. In this script, and according to the development of the action, the gestures and words of the actors and the various movements of the camera are minutely indicated, one by one. The script is, therefore, drama, mime, cinematographic technique, *mise-en-scène* and direction, all at the same time. Now, although the script-writer's part in the film is of the first importance and comes immediately below that of the director, it remains always, for reasons inherent in the fashion in which the art of the cinema has hitherto developed, hopelessly subordinate and obscure. If, in fact, the arts are to be judged from the point of view of direct expression—and one does not really see how else they can be judged—the script-writer is an artist who, although he gives his best to the film, never has the comfort of knowing that he has expressed himself. And so, with all his creative work, he can be nothing more than a provider of suggestions and inventions, of technical, psychological and literary ideas; it is then the director's task to make use of this material according to his own genius and, in fact, to express himself. The script-writer, in short, is the man who remains always in the background; who expends the best of his blood for the success of others; and who, although two thirds of the film's fortune depends upon him, will never see his own name on the posters where the names of the director, of the actors and of the producer are printed. He may, it is true—and as often happens—achieve excellence in his inferior trade, and be very well paid; but he can never say: "It was *I* who made this film . . . in this film *I* expressed myself . . . this film is *me.*" This can only be said by the director, who is, in effect, the only one to sign the film. The script-writer, on the other hand, has to content himself with working for the money he receives, which, whether he likes it or not, ends by becoming the real and only purpose of his job. Thus all that is left for the script-writer is to enjoy life, if he is capable of it, on the money that is the sole result of his toil—passing from one script to another, from a comedy to a drama, from an adventure film to a sentimental film, without interruption, without pause, rather like a governess who goes from one child to another and never has time to grow fond of one before she leaves it and starts again with another; and in the end the fruit of her labors is enjoyed entirely by the mother who is the only one with the right to call the child her own.

But, apart from these disadvantages, which we may call fundamental and immutable, there are others also, in the job of the script-writer, which, though varying according to the quality and type of the film and of his collaborators, are no less annoying on that account. Unlike the director, who enjoys a considerable measure of independence and freedom in his dealings with the producer, the script-writer can only accept or refuse the task offered to him; but, once he has accepted it, he has no choice whatever in the matter of his collaborators: he is himself chosen, he does not choose. And so it comes about that, as a result of the personal likes and dislikes, the convenience, or the caprice of the producer, or simply as a result of chance, the script-writer finds himself forced to work with people he does not care for, people who are his inferiors in culture and breeding, who irritate him by features of character or behavior that are offensive to him. Now working together on a script is not like working together in an office, let us say, or a factory, where each man has his own job to do independently of his neighbor and where personal relations can be reduced to very little or even abolished altogether. Working together on a script means living together from morning to night, it means the marriage and fusion of one's own intelligence, one's own sensibility, one's own spirit, with those of the other collaborators; it means, in short, the creation, during the two or three months that the work lasts, of a fictitious, artificial intimacy whose only purpose is the making of the film, and thereby, in a last analysis (as I have already mentioned), the making of money. This intimacy, moreover, is of the worst possible kind, that is, the most fatiguing, the most unnerving and the most cloying that can be imagined, since it is founded not on work that is done in silence, as might be that of scientists engaged together on some experiment, but on the spoken word. The director usually calls his collaborators together early in the morning, for this is necessitated by the shortness of the time allowed for the completion of the script; and from early morning until night-time the script-writers do nothing but talk, keeping to the work in hand most of the time but often talking from sheer volubility or fatigue, wandering away together on the most varied subjects. One will tell dirty stories, one will expound his political ideas, one will psychologize about some common acquaintance, another talk about actors and actresses, another relieve his feelings by telling of his own personal circumstances; and in the meantime, in the room where they are working, the air is filled with cigarette-smoke, coffee-cups pile up on the tables amongst the pages of the script, and the script-writers themselves, who had come in in the morning well-groomed, tidy and with neatly brushed hair, are to be seen in the evening rumpled and sweaty and untidy, in their shirt-sleeves, looking worse than if they had been trying to ravish a frigid, restive woman. And indeed the mechanical, stereotyped way in which scripts are fabricated strongly resembles a kind of rape of the intelligence, having its origin in determination and interest rather than in any sort of attraction or sympathy. Of course it can also happen that the film is of superior quality, that the director and his collaborators were already, beforehand, bound together by mutual esteem and friendship, and that, in fact, the work is carried out in the ideal conditions that may occur in any human activity, however disagreeable; but these favorable combinations are rare—as, indeed, good films are rare.

It was after I had signed the contract for a second film-script—this time not with Battista but with another producer—that courage and determination suddenly abandoned me and I began, with increasing repugnance and annoyance, to resent all the disadvantages of which I have already spoken. Each day, from the time when I got up in the morning, seemed like an arid desert, with no oasis of meditation or leisure, dominated by the merciless sun of forced cinema inspiration. As soon as I entered the director's house and he welcomed me in his study with some remark such as: "Well, did you think about it last night? Did you find a solution?"—I had a feeling of boredom and rebellion. Then, during our work, everything seemed to be infected with impatience and disgust—the divagations of every kind by which the director and the script-writers, as I have already mentioned, seek to alleviate the long hours of discussion; the incomprehension or obtuseness or simple divergence of opinion amongst my collaborators as the script was gradually written; even the director's praises for each of my inventions or decisions, praises which tasted bitter to me because I felt, as I have said, that I was giving the best of myself for something which did not fundamentally concern me and in which I was not participating willingly. This last disadvantage, in fact, appeared to me at that time to be the most intolerable of all; and, each time that the director, speaking in the demagogic, vulgar way that is common to so many of them, jumped up in his chair and exclaimed: "Bravo! You're a wow!"—I could not help thinking, contemptuously:

"I might have put that idea into some drama or comedy of my own." Furthermore, by some strange and bitter contradiction, I could never manage, in spite of my repugnance, to fail in my duty as a script-writer. Film-scripts are rather like the old-fashioned four-in-hands, in which there were some horses, stronger or more willing, who did the pulling, and others who pretended to pull while really they allowed themselves to be dragged along by their companions. Well, in spite of all my impatience and disgust, I was always the horse who did the pulling; the other two, the director and my script-writer colleague, when faced with any difficulty always waited—as I very soon noticed—for me to come forward with my solution. And I, though inwardly cursing both my conscientiousness and my facility, did not hesitate but, with some sudden inspiration, provided the solution required. I was not driven to do this from any spirit of rivalry, but merely from a sense of honesty stronger than any contrary desire: I was paid, therefore I had to work. But each time I was ashamed of myself and had a feeling both of avarice and of regret, as though, for a little money, I had ruined something beyond price, something of which I could, somehow or other, have made an infinitely better use.

As I said, I did not become aware of all these disadvantages until two months after I had signed the first contract with Battista. And at first I did not understand why they had not been obvious to me from the beginning and why I had taken such a long time to notice them. But, when the feeling of repugnance and failure aroused in my mind by the work I had once so ardently desired still persisted, I could not help—very gradually, as often happens—coming to connect it in some way with my relations with Emilia. And at last I realized that the work disgusted me because Emilia no longer loved me, or at least gave an appearance of no longer loving me. And that I had faced the work with courage and confidence as long as I had been sure of Emilia's love. Now that I was no longer sure of it, courage and confidence had deserted me and the work seemed to me nothing better than slavery, waste of talent, and loss of time.

6

I BEGAN THEREFORE TO LIVE like one who carries within him the infirmity of an impending disease but cannot make up his mind to go to the doctor; in other words, I tried not to reflect too much either upon Emilia's demeanor towards me, or upon my work. I knew that some day I should have to face this kind of reflection; but, just because I was aware that it was unavoidable, I sought to put it off for as long as possible: the little I had already suspected made me shy away from it, and also, albeit unconsciously, fear it. And so I went on having those relations with Emilia which at the beginning had seemed to me intolerable, and which now, when I feared the worst, I tried to persuade myself—without any success—were normal: during the day indifferent, casual, evasive conversations; at night, from time to time, love-making, with much embarrassment and a hint of cruelty on my side, and no real participation on hers. In the meantime I continued to work diligently, even furiously, though more and more unwillingly and with a more and more decided repugnance. If I had had the courage to acknowledge the situation to myself, at that moment, I should certainly have renounced my work and renounced love as well, for I should have been convinced, as I was later, that all life had gone out of both. But I did not have that courage; and perhaps I deluded myself into believing that time would take it upon itself to solve my problems, without any effort on my part. Time, in fact, did solve them, but not in the way I should have wished. And so the days passed, in a dull, dim atmosphere of expectancy, with Emilia denying herself to me and myself denying myself to my work.

The script I was writing for Battista meanwhile was nearing its end; and at the same time Battista mentioned a new undertaking to me, of much more serious importance than the first, in which he wanted me to have a share. Battista was a hurried, evasive sort of man, like all producers; and the very fleeting hints he gave me never went beyond such remarks as: "Molteni, as soon as you've finished this script, we're going to start at once on another . . . a really important one"; or: "Molteni, be prepared, one of these days . . . there's a proposal I've got to make to you"; or again, rather more explicitly: "Don't sign any contracts, Molteni, because in a fortnight's time you're going to sign one with me." So I knew that, after this first, comparatively unimportant script, Battista was preparing to give me another, more important one to do, for which, naturally, I should be far better paid. I must confess that, in spite of my growing distaste for this type of work, the first thing I thought of, instinctively, was the flat and the money that still had to be paid on it; and I was delighted at Battista's proposal. In any case, that is what film work is like: even when, as in my case, one is not in love with it, every new offer is agreeable, and if offers do not arrive, one becomes suspicious and fears that one is being excluded.

But I said nothing to Emilia of this new offer of Battista's, and that for two reasons: in the first place because I did not yet know whether I should accept it; and also because I had by now realized that my work did not interest her and I preferred not to speak of it, so as not to provoke some further confirmation of her coldness and indifference, to which, however, I persisted in paying no importance. These two things, furthermore, were linked together in a manner of which I was vaguely conscious: I was not sure about accepting the job precisely because I felt Emilia no longer loved me; whereas if she had loved me I should have talked about it to her, and talking about it to her meant, really and truly, accepting it.

I went out one morning in order to go and see the director with whom I was working on script No. 1 for Battista. I knew it was the last time I should be going there, because there were now only a few pages left before the end, and this thought cheered me: at last this toil was on the point of finishing and I should again be my own master for at least half the day. Besides, as always happens with film-scripts, two months of work had sufficed to imbue me with a profound dislike for the characters and the story of the film. I knew that I should very soon find myself at grips with a set of characters and a story destined quickly to become, in their turn, no less intolerable; but in the meantime I was escaping from the first set, and the prospect of this was enough to bring me considerable relief.

My hope of approaching freedom caused me to work, that morning, with unusual facility and inventiveness. In order to complete the script, not more than two or three points, of little importance, required touching up; upon these, however, we had been hesitating for some days. But, carried away by my inspiration, I succeeded, from the very beginning, in guiding the discussion along the right lines and solving, one after the other, all the outstanding difficulties, so that, after barely a couple of hours, we realized that the script was really finished, this time beyond question. In the end—just as happens with a certain kind of interminable, unnerving mountain excursion, when the goal, by now despaired of, appears suddenly at a bend in the path—I wrote down a sentence of dialogue and then exclaimed in surprise: "Why, it can finish here!" The director, who was walking up and down his study while I was writing at the desk, came across to me; he looked over my shoulder at the page and then he too said, in a surprised, almost incredulous voice: "You're right, it can finish there." So I wrote the words THE END at the bottom of the page, closed the copybook and rose to my feet.

For a moment we said nothing, both of us looking at the desk upon which lay the portfolio, now closed, containing the completed script—indeed rather like two almost exhausted mountain-climbers looking at the little lake or rock which it has cost them so much toil to reach. Then the director said: "We've done it."

"Yes," I repated, "we've done it!"

This director was called Pasetti and was a fairish young man, angular, thin, precise and clean-looking, with the appearance of a meticulous geometrician or accountant rather than of an artist. He was about the same age as myself; but, as always happens with script-writing, the relations between him and me were those of superior and inferior, for the director always has greater authority than any other of the collaborators. After a moment he resumed, with his characteristically cold, awkward pleasantness: "I must say, Riccardo, I must say, you're just like a horse that smells its own stable. I was certain we'd have to work for at least four more days . . . and now we've polished it off in two hours. It was the prospect of the cash, was it?—that inspired you!"

I did not dislike Pasetti, in spite of his mediocrity and his almost unbelievable psychological obtuseness; and there had grown up between us a relationship that was in a way well-balanced, he being a man without imagination and without nerves, but conscious of his limitations and fundamentally modest, while I was all nerves and imagination, morbidly sensitive and complex. Adopting his facetious tone and joining in the joke, I answered: "Of course, what you say is quite true—it was the prospect of the cash."

Lighting a cigarette, he went on: "But don't imagine the game is finished. All we've done is the main part of the job; we've got to revise the whole of the dialogue . . . You can't rest on your laurels yet."

I could not help noticing, yet again, how he expressed himself almost entirely in commonplaces and ready-made phrases; and I looked discreetly at the clock. It was almost one. "Don't worry," I said; "I shall be at your service for any touching-up that's needed."

Shaking his head, he replied: "I know my own chickens. I shall tell Battista to hold up the last instalment of your pay until you can't hold out any longer."

He had his own way, facetious yet authoritative, and surprising in one so young, of spurring on his collaborators by alternating praise with blame, flattery with reserve, entreaty with command; and in this sense he might even have been called a good director, since directing—two thirds of it, anyhow—consists in having a shrewd knowledge of how to get others to do one's bidding. I answered, drawing him out, as usual: "No, you get him to pay me the whole instalment and I promise you I'll be at your service for any touching-up that's needed."

"But what do you do with all this money?" he asked, awkwardly jocose; "it's never enough for you . . . and yet you haven't any mistresses, you don't gamble, you haven't any children . . ."

"I have to pay the instalments on the flat," I replied seriously, lowering my eyes, slightly annoyed at his indiscreetness.

"Have you much to pay still?"

"Almost the whole amount."

"I bet it's your wife who bullies you until you get yourself paid what's owing to you. I can hear her saying, 'Now, Riccardo, remember to make them pay you that last instalment!' "

"Yes, it's my wife," I lied, "but you know what women are. Their homes are immensely important to them."

"You're telling me!" He started talking about his wife, who very much resembled him and whom he, nevertheless—or so I gathered—considered to be a bizarre creature, full of caprices and all sorts of unexpected things—in fact, a woman. I listened with an attentive expression, though in point of fact I was thinking about something else. He concluded in an unforeseen manner: "That's all very well . . . but I know what you script-writers are: you're all the same, the whole lot of you. After you once get your money, one's lucky to see you again. No, no, I shall tell Battista to keep back the last instalment!"

"Come on, Pasetti, do what I ask!"

"Well, well, I'll see. But don't count on it."

I glanced stealthily at the clock again. Now I had given him the chance to flaunt his authority and he had taken it: so I could go away. I began: "Well, well, I'm pleased to have finished the job—or rather, as you say, the main part of it. But now I think it's time for me to go."

He exclaimed, in his blundering, vivacious way: "Not at all, not at all; we've got to drink to the success of the film. My goodness, of course we have. You're not going away like that, after finishing the script!"

I answered resignedly: "If it's a question of a drink, I'm all for it."

"Come this way, then. I think my wife would be pleased to have a drink with us."

I followed him out of the study, and along a narrow passage, bare and white and smelling strongly of cooking and baby's garments. He preceded me into the sitting-room, calling out: "Luisa, Molteni and I have finished the script. Now we're going to drink to the success of the film."

Signora Pasetti rose from her armchair and came forward to meet us. She was a small woman with a large head and two bands of smooth black hair framing her long, oval, very pale face. Her eyes were large but light in color and inexpressive, and they became animated only when her husband was present: and then she never took them off his face for one single moment, like an affectionate dog with its master. But when her husband was not there she kept them lowered, with an almost stubbornly modest air. Fragile and minute in figure, she had brought four children into the world in four years of matrimony. With his usual embarrassing cheerfulness, Pasetti now said: "Today we have a drink. I'm going to make a cocktail."

"Not for me, Gino," Signora Pasetti warned him; "you know I don't drink."

"*We'll* drink, then."

I sat down in an armchair of sand-papered wood with a flowered cover, in front of a red-brick chimney-place; and Signora Pasetti sat down on the other side of the fireplace, on another identical chair. The sitting-room, I noticed, when I looked round, was an accurate copy of its master: furnished with a "suite" in sham rustic style, it was bright and clean and orderly but at the same time rather bleak—like the house of a meticulous accountant or bank clerk. I had nothing to do but look, for Signora Pasetti did not appear to feel any need to speak to me. She sat opposite me with eyes lowered, her hands in her lap, quite motionless. Meanwhile Pasetti went over to the other end of the room, to an extremely ugly composite piece of furniture, a radio containing a bar; then he stooped down twice, on his thin legs, and, with precise, angular movements, took out two bottles, one of vermouth and one of gin, three glasses and a shaker. He placed them all on a tray and carried the tray over to a small table in front of the fireplace. I noticed that the bottles were both of them sealed and intact: it did not look as if Pasetti often allowed himself the drink he was now about to prepare for us. The shaker, too, was bright and shining and appeared quite new. He announced that he was going to fetch some ice and went out.

We sat a long time in silence, and then, in order to say something, I said: "We've finished the script, at last!"

Without raising her eyes, Signora Pasetti replied: "Yes, so Gino said."

"I'm sure it will make a fine film."

"I'm sure it will too; otherwise Gino would not have agreed to do it."

"Do you know the story?"

"Yes, Gino told it me."

"Do you like it?"

"Gino likes it, so I like it too."

"Do you always agree, you two?"

"Gino and I? Yes, always."

"Which of the two of you is in command?"

"Gino, of course."

I noticed that she had contrived to repeat the name of Gino each time she had opened her mouth. I had spoken lightly and almost jokingly; she had answered me all the time with the utmost seriousness. Then Pasetti came in again with the ice-pail and called out to me: "Your wife's on the telephone, Riccardo."

For some unaccountable reason I felt my heart sink, with a sudden return of my usual unhappiness. Mechanically I rose and started towards the door. Pasetti added: "The telephone's in the kitchen—but if you like you can answer it here . . . I've switched it through."

The telephone was, in fact, on a cabinet beside the fireplace. I took off the receiver and heard Emilia's voice say to me: "I'm sorry, but today you'll have to go out to lunch somewhere . . . I'm going to my mother's."

"But why didn't you tell me before?"

"I didn't want to disturb you at your work."

"All right," I said, "I'll go and eat at a restaurant."

"We'll meet later; good-bye."

She rang off and I turned towards Pasetti. "Riccardo," he asked at once, "are you not lunching at home?"

"No, I'm going to a restaurant."

"Well, stay and have lunch with us . . . pot-luck, of course . . . but we'd be very pleased."

An inexplicable feeling of despondency had come over me at the thought of having lunch alone at a restaurant, probably because I had been looking forward with pleasure to announcing to Emilia that the script was finished. Perhaps I should not have done this after all, knowing, as I have said, that she was no longer interested in what I did; but at first I had yielded to the old habit of our past relationship. Pasetti's invitation gave me pleasure; and I accepted it with almost excessive gratitude. He, in the meantime, had uncorked the two bottles, and now, with gestures more like those of a chemist calculating a dose of medicine rather than of a drinker, he was pouring the gin and the vermouth into a measure and then transferring them into the shaker. Signora Pasetti, as usual, never took her eyes off her husband. At last, when Pasetti had thoroughly shaken the cocktail and was about to pour it out into the glasses, she said: "Only just a drop for me, please. And you too, Gino, don't drink much; it might do you harm."

"It isn't every day that one finishes a script!"

He filled our two glasses, and in the third put only a little of the cocktail, as his wife had requested. We all three took our glasses and raised them in a toast. "To a hundred more scripts like this one!" said Pasetti, just wetting his lips and putting his glass down again on the table. I emptied mine at one draught. Signora Pasetti drank with little sips and then got up, saying: "I'm going to the kitchen to see what the cook is doing . . . if you'll allow me."

She went out. Pasetti took her place in the flowered armchair, and we started chattering. Or rather, *he* chattered, talking mostly about the script, and I listened, showing my approval by muttered words and nods of the head, and drinking. Pasetti's glass was always at the same point, not even half emptied; but I had already emptied mine three times. I now, for some reason, had an acute feeling of unhappiness, and I drank in the hope that tipsiness would drive it away. But I can stand a lot of alcohol and Pasetti's cocktails were light and watered down. And so those three or four little glasses served no purpose except to increase my obscure sense of wretchedness. All at once I asked myself: "Why do I feel so unhappy?"; and then I remembered that the first stab of pain had come when, shortly before, I had heard Emilia's voice on the telephone, so cold, so reasonable, so indifferent; and above all so different from that of Signora Pasetti, whenever she pronounced the magic name of Gino. But I was unable to analyze my thoughts more closely, because, shortly afterwards, Signora Pasetti appeared in the door and told us we could come through into the dining-room.

Pasetti's dining-room resembled his study and sitting-room: neat, cheap, coquettish furniture of sand-papered wood; colored earthenware crockery; glasses and bottles of thick green glass; tablecloth and napkins of unbleached hemp. We sat down in this tiny room which was almost entirely taken up by the table, so that the maid, when handing round the dishes, could not help disturbing first one, then another of the party; and then started eating apologetically and in silence. Soon the maid changed the plates, and I, to get the conversation going, asked Pasetti some question or other as to his plans for the future. He answered me in his usual cold, precise, undistinguished voice, in which modesty and lack of imagination seemed to be responsible not merely for the choice of words but even for the slightest variation in tone. I was silent, finding nothing to say, for Pasetti's plans did not interest me and, even if they had, that monotonous, colorless voice of his would have made them tedious. But, as my bored glances wandered from one object to another without managing to find anything to detain them, they came to rest at last upon the face of Pasetti's wife who was also listening, her chin supported on her hand and her eyes fixed, as usual, upon her husband. Then, as I looked at her face, I was struck by the expression in her eyes—amorous, melting, a mixture of humble admiration, unlimited gratitude, physical infatuation and a sort of melancholy timidity. This expression astonished me, partly because the feeling behind it was, to me, utterly mysterious: Pasetti, so colorless, so thin, so mediocre, so obviously lacking in qualities that might please a woman, seemed an incredible object for attention of that kind. Then I said to myself that every man always ends by finding the woman who appreciates and loves him, and that to judge of other people's feelings on the basis of one's own is a mistake; and I had a feeling of sympathy for her, in her devotion to her man, and of satisfaction on Pasetti's behalf, for whom, as I have already said, I cherished, in spite of his mediocrity, a sort of ironical friendship. But, suddenly, just as I was losing interest and turning my eyes elsewhere, I was transfixed by a thought from I know not where, or rather, by a sudden perception:

"In those eyes is the whole love of this woman for her husband . . . he is content with himself and with his own work because she loves him. But it is a long time since that feeling showed itself in Emilia's eyes. Emilia does not love me, she will never love me again."

At this thought, which revived in me a deep-seated pain, I had a sense almost of physical shock; so much so that I made a grimace, and Signora Pasetti asked me anxiously if by any chance the meat I was eating was tough. I reassured her: the meat was not tough. Meanwhile, though I still pretended to listen to Pasetti who went on talking about his plans for the future, I tried to analyze that first sensation of pain, so acute and at the same time so obscure. Then I understood that, during the last month, I had been seeking all the time to accustom myself to an intolerable situation, but that I had not, in reality, succeeded: I could not endure to go on living in that way, what with Emilia who did not love me and my work which, owing to her not loving me, I could not love. And suddenly I said to myself: "I can't go on like this. I must have an explanation with Emilia, once and for all . . . and, if necessary, part from her and give up my work as well."

Nevertheless, although I thought of these things with despairing resolution, I realized that I could not bring myself wholly to believe in them: in reality I was not yet altogether convinced that Emilia no longer loved me, nor that I should find the strength to part from her, give up my film work and go back to living alone. In other words I had a feeling almost of incredulity, of a painful kind quite new to me, at finding myself faced with a fact that in my mind I now held to be indubitable. Why did Emilia no longer love me, and how had she arrived at this state of indifference? With a feeling of anguish in my heart, I foresaw that this first general conclusion, already so painful, would demand an infinite number of further, minor proofs before I became completely convinced—proofs which, just because they were of lesser importance, would be more concrete and, if possible, still more painful. I was, in fact, now convinced that Emilia could no longer love me; but I did not know either why or how this had come about; and in order to be entirely persuaded of it I must have an explanation with her, I must seek out and examine, I must plunge the thin, ruthless blade of investigation into the wound which, hitherto, I had exerted myself to ignore. This thought frightened me; and yet I realized that only after carrying my investigation through to the bitter end should I have the courage to part from Emilia, as, at the first moment, the desperate impulse of my mind had suggested.

In the meantime I went on eating and drinking and listening to Pasetti, but almost without noticing what I was doing. In due time, however, lunch came to an end. We went back to the sitting-room, and there I had to submit to all the various formalities of the bourgeois guest—coffee with one, or two, lumps of sugar; the offer of a liqueur, sweet or dry, received with the customary refusal; idle conversation to pass the time. Finally, when it seemed to me that I could take my leave without giving an impression of haste, I rose from my chair. But, just at that moment, the Pasetti's eldest little girl was brought into the room by her nurse, to be displayed to her parents before her daily walk. She was a dark-haired, pale child with very large eyes, of a very ordinary type, insignificant, in fact, like her parents. I remember that, as I watched her letting herself be kissed and embraced by her mother, this thought crossed my mind: "I shall never be happy like them. Emilia and I will never have a child"; and immediately afterwards, as a result of this first thought, a second one, even more bitter: "How shabby all this is, how ordinary, how unoriginal. I am following in the footsteps of all husbands who are not loved by their wives—envying a perfectly ordinary couple while they kiss and hug their offspring . . . exactly, indeed, like any ordinary husband who finds himself in my position." This mortifying idea aroused in me a feeling of impatience at the affectionate scene I was witnessing. I declared, brusquely, that I must go. Pasetti accompanied me to the door, his pipe between his teeth. I had a feeling that my leave-taking had astonished and shocked his wife, who was perhaps expecting me to be touched at the edifying sight of her maternal love.

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I HAD NO ENGAGEMENT until four o'clock, so that I had an hour and a half to spare; and when I was in the street, I started off, more or less instinctively, towards home. I knew that Emilia could not be there, since she had gone to lunch with her mother; but, filled as I was with distress and bewilderment, I almost hoped that this might not be true and that I should find her there after all: in which case, I said to myself, I would pluck up courage to speak to her frankly, to insist on a decisive explanation. I was aware that upon this explanation depended not only my relations with Emilia, but also my work; but now, after so many pitiful shilly-shallyings and hypocrisies, I felt I preferred any kind of disaster to the prolongation of a situation that was becoming only too painfully clear and less and less tolerable. Perhaps I should be compelled to part from Emilia, to refuse Battista's second script; so much the better. The truth, whatever it might be, seemed to me now to be infinitely more desirable than my present obscure, degraded position, with falsehood on the one hand and self-pity on the other.

As I came into my own street, I was again seized with perplexity: Emilia was certainly not at home, and I, in that new flat which now seemed to me not so much strange as actively hostile, should feel more lost and miserable than I should in a public place. For a moment I was almost tempted to turn back and to go and spend that hour and a half in a café. Then, with a sudden, providential reawakening of memory, I recalled that I had promised Battista, the previous day, to be at home at that time, so that he could telephone me and arrange an appointment. This would be an important appointment, because Battista was to speak to me at last about the new script, and to make concrete proposals and introduce me to the director; and so I had assured him that I would be at home at that time—as, indeed, I always was. It is true that I myself could have telephoned to Battista from a café; but, to begin with, I was not entirely sure of finding him at home, because Battista often lunched at a restaurant; and, in addition, as I said to myself, I needed some pretext, in my acute state of bewilderment, to go back home; and Battista's telephone call exactly provided me with such a pretext.

So I entered the hall, crossed to the elevator, closed the doors and pressed the button for the top floor on which I lived. But, while the car was going up, it suddenly came into my head that in reality I had no right to fix this appointment, inasmuch as I was not at all sure that I should accept Battista's new proposition. Everything depended upon my explanation with Emilia, and I knew that, if Emilia declared explicitly that she no longer loved me, not merely should I not write this new script but I should never write any more film-scripts for the rest of my life. Emilia, however, would not be at home; and when Battista telephoned, I should not be in a position, honestly, to tell him whether I agreed to discuss his proposition or not. Now, amongst all the many absurd things in my life, one of the most absurd would be, I felt, to negotiate a deal and then back out of it. At this thought I was assailed by an almost hysterical impulse of rage and repugnance, and all at once I stopped the elevator and then pressed the button to go down again to the ground floor. It was better, I said to myself, far better not to let Battista find me at home when he telephoned. Later on, that same evening, I would have my explanation with Emilia; and next day I would give the producer an answer in accordance with its result. In the meantime the elevator was going down and I was looking at all those floors going past one after another, behind the ground glass doors, with the desperate eye of a fish seeing the level of the water rapidly descending inside the tank in which it lives. At last the car stopped and I was on the point of opening the doors. But then, suddenly, a new idea made me pause: it was true that my decision about the new job with Battista depended upon my explanation with Emilia; but if it should happen that Emilia, that same evening, made me a fresh avowal of her love, should I not be taking the risk of annoying Battista by not being at home when he telephoned, and thereby losing the job? Producers, as I knew from experience, were as capricious as so many petty tyrants; a hitch of this kind might be enough to make Battista change his mind, and might induce him to choose another script-writer. These reflections pursued one another swiftly through my aching head, producing in me an obscure feeling of acute wretchedness: truly I was an unfortunate creature, I said to myself, torn between egotism and affection, incapable of choice or decision. And I do not know how much longer I should have stayed there, hesitating and bewildered, inside the lift, if a young lady, her arms laden with parcels, had not suddenly thrown open the doors. She uttered a cry of fright on discovering me standing there, stock still, in front of her; then, recovering herself, she too came into the car and asked me which floor I wanted to go to. I told her. "I go to the second," she announced, and pressed the button. The elevator started to ascend again.

Once on my own landing, I had a sense of profound relief; and at the same time it occurred to me: "What sort of a state am I in, to be behaving like this? How can I have descended so low? What point have I reached?" With these thoughts in my head I went into the flat, closed the door and went through into the living-room. And there, lying on the sofa, in a dressing-gown, reading a magazine. I saw Emilia. Beside the sofa was a small table upon which could be seen plates and the remains of lunch: Emilia had not gone out, she had not lunched with her mother; in short, she had lied to me.

I must have had a troubled expression on my face, for she, after looking at me, asked: "What's the matter? What's happened to you?"

"Weren't you going to have lunch with your mother?" I said in a stifled voice; "how on earth do you come to be at home? You told me you were out for lunch!"

"My mother telephoned afterwards to say that she couldn't," she replied placidly.

"But why didn't you let me know?"

"My mother rang up at the last moment. I thought you'd have left the Pasettis'."

Suddenly—why, I could not tell—I was certain she was lying. But, being incapable of producing any proof of it, not merely to her but even to myself, I was silent, and I too sat down on the sofa. After a moment, turning over the pages of the magazine, she asked without looking at me: "And you—what did you do?"

"The Pasettis asked me to stay."

At that moment the telephone rang. I thought: "It's Battista. Now I shall tell him I'm not going to do any more scripts. To hell with everything. It's perfectly clear that this woman doesn't feel the smallest crumb of affection for me." Meanwhile Emilia, with her usual indolence, was saying:

"Do just go and see who it is . . . it's sure to be for you." I rose and went out.

The telephone was in the adjoining room, on the bedside table. Before picking up the receiver, I looked towards the bed, saw the solitary pillow lying at the head of it, in the middle, and felt my resolution harden: all was finished, I should refuse the script and then leave Emilia. I took off the receiver, but then, instead of Battista's voice, I heard that of my mother-in-law, who asked: "Riccardo, is Emilia there?"

Almost without thinking, I answered: "No, she's not here. She said she was lunching with you. She's out. I thought you were together."

"Why, I telephoned her to say I couldn't manage it because my maid has her day off today!" she began in astonishment. At that moment I looked up from the telephone and saw, through the door which had been left open, Emilia lying on the divan looking at me; and I noticed that her eyes, which were fixed upon me, were full not so much of wonder as of quiet aversion and cold contempt. I realized that between the two of us, now, it was I who had lied, and that she knew why I had lied. So I mumbled a few words of farewell and then, suddenly, as though correcting myself, I cried: "No . . . wait . . . Here's Emilia just coming in. I'll send her to you." At the same time I beckoned to Emilia to come to the telephone.

She got up from the sofa, crossed the room with her head bent and took the receiver from my hand without thanking or looking at me. I walked away towards the living-room, and she made an impatient gesture as if to tell me to shut the door. I did so; and then, my mind filled with confusion, I sat down on the divan and waited.

Emilia was a long time at the telephone, and I, in my painful, apprehensive impatience, almost felt that she was doing it on purpose. But of course, I kept saying to myself, her telephone conversations with her mother were always very long: she had remained deeply attached to her mother, who was a widow and all alone, and she had no one but her; and she seemed to have made her her confidante. At last the door opened and Emilia reappeared. I sat silent and still, fully conscious, from her unwontedly hard expression, that she was angry with me.

And indeed she said at once, as she started collecting the plates and forks on the little table: "Are you crazy? Why on earth did you go and tell Mother I was out?"

Hurt by her tone, I did not open my mouth. "To see if I had told the truth?" she went on; "to see if it was true that Mother had really told me she couldn't have me to lunch?"

I answered at last, with an effort: "That may have been the reason."

"Well, please never do such a thing again. I speak the truth, and I've nothing to hide from you, and I just can't endure that kind of thing."

She spoke these words in a tone of finality and then took up the tray on which she had put together the plates and glasses and went out of the room.

Left alone, I had, for a moment, a bitter feeling of victory. It was true, then: Emilia no longer loved me. In the old days she certainly would not have spoken to me like that. She would have said to me, with a mixture of gentleness and amused surprise: "Perhaps you really thought I had told you a lie?" and then she would have laughed, as if at some childish, easily forgivable error, and finally—yes, finally she would have even shown herself flattered: "My goodness, you don't mean to say you're really jealous? And don't you know I love nobody except you?" It would all have ended in an almost motherly kiss, and a caress of her long, large hands on my brow, as though to chase away all thought and anxiety. But it was also true that in the old days I should never have thought of watching her, still less of doubting her word. Everything was changed: she in her love, I in mine. And everything seemed set for a steady change for the worse.

But man is always ready to hope, even when convinced that there is no hope. I had had a clear proof that Emilia no longer loved me, and yet there was still a doubt in my mind—or rather, a hope—that I might have placed a rash interpretation upon an incident which, fundamentally, was devoid of importance. All at once I said to myself that I must not be precipitate; that I must make her tell me herself that she no longer loved me; that only she could provide me with the proofs that I still lacked . . . These thoughts pursued each other swiftly through my mind as I sat on the divan staring into vacancy. Then the door opened and Emilia came in again.

She came over to the sofa and lay down again, behind me, and took up the magazine. Then, without turning, I said: "In a few moments Battista is going to telephone and make a proposal for me to do another script . . . a very important script."

"Well, you must be pleased, aren't you?" she said in her calm voice.

"With this script," I went on, "I shall be able to earn a lot of money . . . anyhow, enough to pay two instalments on the lease."

This time she said nothing. I continued: "This script, moreover, is important for me because, if I do it, I shall have others to do afterwards . . . this is to be a big film."

At last, in the detached voice of a person who is reading and who speaks without looking up from the page, she asked: "What film is it?"

"I don't know," I replied. I was silent for a moment, and then, in a rather emphatic tone, I added: "But I've decided to refuse this job."

"And why?" Her voice was still quiet, indifferent.

I rose, walked round the sofa, and came and sat down in front of Emilia. She was holding the magazine in her hand, but when she saw me sit down opposite her, she lowered it and looked at me. "Because," I said with full sincerity, "I, as you know, hate this work and do it only for love of you . . . in order to pay the instalments on this flat, which means so much to you or seems to mean so much to you. But now I know for certain that you no longer love me . . . and so all this is useless."

She was looking at me with her eyes wide open, but she said nothing. "You don't love me any longer," I went on, "and I shall not go on doing these jobs. As for the flat . . . well, I shall mortgage it or sell the lease. The fact is, I can't go on like this any longer and I feel that the moment has come to tell you so. So now you know. In a short time Battista will telephone and I shall tell him to go to the devil."

Now I had said it, and the moment had therefore arrived for the explanation I had so long both feared and desired. At this thought I felt almost relieved, and I looked at Emilia with a new frankness as I awaited her reply. She was silent for a little time before she answered me. Obviously my forthright declaration had surprised her. In the end, indeed, rather cautiously and precisely as if she wanted to gain time, she asked: "What makes you think I don't love you any more?"

"Everything," I answered with passionate vehemence.

"For instance?"

"Tell me first of all whether it's true or not."

She insisted, obstinately: "No, you tell me what makes you think that."

"Everything," I repeated; "your way of talking to me, of looking at me, the way you behave to me. Everything. A month ago you even insisted on our sleeping apart. You wouldn't have wanted that, once upon a time!"

She looked at me, irresolute; and then, suddenly, I saw her eyes light up with rapid decision. She had, in that precise moment, I thought, determined upon the attitude to be taken with me, and now would not deviate from her decision, whatever I might say or do. At last she replied, quite gently: "But I assure you, I swear to you. I cannot sleep with the shutters open. I need darkness and silence. I swear it."

"But I offered to sleep with the shutters closed."

"Well," she hesitated, "must I also tell you, then, that when you're asleep you're not silent?"

"What do you mean?"

"You snore." She smiled faintly and then went on: "You used to wake me up every night . . . That's why I decided to sleep by myself."

I was somewhat disconcerted at this detail of my snoring, of which I was ignorant and which, furthermore, I found it difficult to believe: I had slept with other women and none of them had ever told me that I snored. "And then," I said, "I know you don't love me because a wife who loves"—I hesitated, slightly shamefaced—"does not make love in the way you've been doing, for some time past, with me."

She immediately protested, irritably and roughly: "Really I don't know what it is you want. We make love every time you wish to. And have I ever refused you?"

I knew that of the two of us, in this kind of confidential talk, it was always I who was the modest, the shamefaced, the embarrassed one. Emilia, usually so reserved and proper, seemed, in intimacy, to lose all idea of modesty or embarrassment: in fact, in a way that vaguely astonished me every time and that I found attractive for some quality it had of natural innocence, she used to talk, before, during, and after our love-making, of that love-making itself, without the slightest veil of tenderness or reticence and with a disconcerting crudeness and freedom. "No, not refused," I muttered; "no . . . but . . ."

She resumed, in a conclusive tone of voice: "Every single time you've wanted to make love, we've done so. And you're not one to be contented with just the simple act . . . you're good at making love, you know."

"Do you think so?" I asked, almost flattered.

"Yes," she said drily, without looking at me, "but if I didn't love you, the very fact of your being good at making love would irritate me, and I should try to avoid it . . . and a woman can always find excuses for refusing, can't she?"

"All right," I said, "you do it, you've never refused me . . . but the way in which you do it is not the way of a person who loves."

"Why, in what way do I do it?"

I ought to have answered her: "You do it like a prostitute who submits to her client and wants only that the thing shall be quickly over . . . that's how you do it!" But, out of respect for her and for myself too, I preferred to remain silent. And in any case, what would have been the use of it? She would have replied that it was not true, and—quite probably—she would have reminded me, with crude technical precision, of certain transports of sensuality on her own side, in which everything was included—skill, pursuit of pleasure, violent excitement, erotic fury—everything except tenderness and the indescribable abandonment of true surrender; and I should not have known what to say to this; and, into the bargain, I should have offended her with that insulting comparison and thus have put myself in the wrong. And so, in despair, realizing that the explanation I had wanted to bring about had now dissolved into thin air, I said: "Well anyhow, whatever the reason, I'm convinced you don't love me any more—that's all."

Again, before either answering or moving, she looked at me as if to calculate, from the expression of my face, what would be the most suitable attitude for her to take towards me. I noticed then a peculiarity which I already knew: her beautiful, dark, serene face, so harmonious, so symmetrical, so compact, underwent, through the irresolution that cleft her mind, a process almost, as it were, of decay: one cheek seemed to have grown thinner (but not the other), her mouth was no longer exactly in the middle of her face, her eyes, bewildered and dim, seemed to be disintegrating within their sockets as though within a circle of dark wax. I said that I already knew this peculiarity of hers: this same thing did in fact happen every time she had to face a decision which she disliked or towards which she did not feel herself naturally drawn. And then, with a sudden impulse of her whole body, she threw her arms round my neck, saying in a voice that sounded to me false: "But Riccardo, why do you say that? . . . I do love you . . . just as much as I did in the past." Her breath was warm in my ear, and I felt her pass her hand over my forehead, my temples, my hair, and pull my head down against her breast, clasping it tightly between her arms.

But the idea came into my mind that she was embracing me like that so as not to show me the expression on her face, which was perhaps merely bored and at the same time diligent, the expression of a person who does something in which his spirit has no share, purely from volition; and as I pressed my face, in a desperate longing for love, against her breast, half-bared and rising and falling with her calm breathing, I could not help thinking: "These are only gestures . . . but she is bound to give herself away by some remark or some intonation in her voice." I waited a little, and then she ventured to say, cautiously: "What would you do if I really had ceased to love you?"

So I was right, I thought in bitter triumph; she had betrayed herself. She wished to know what I would do if she had ceased to love me, so as to weigh up and estimate all the risks of complete frankness. Without moving, speaking into her soft, warm breast, I said: "I've already told you . . . the first thing I'd do would be to refuse Battista's new job." I should have liked to add: "And I should part from you"; but I had not the courage to say it at that moment, with my cheek against her breast and her hand on my forehead. In reality I still hoped that she might love me, and I was afraid that this separation, even by the admission of its mere possibility, might really come to pass. Finally I heard her say, while she still went on embracing me closely: "But I do love you . . . and all this is absurd. Now, you know what you're going to do? As soon as Battista telephones, you must make an appointment with him and then you must go and accept the job."

"But why should I do that, seeing that you've ceased to love me?" I cried in exasperation.

Her answer, this time, was given in a tone of reasonable reproof. "I love you, but don't go on making me repeat it . . . and it means a lot to me to stay in this flat. If it doesn't suit you to take this job, I shall not make any objection . . . but if you don't want to take it because you think I've ceased to love you or because you think the flat doesn't mean anything to me, let me tell you you're quite wrong."

I began almost to hope that she was not lying; and at the same time I realized that, at least for the moment, she had persuaded me. And yet, in desperation, I now wanted to know more, to be utterly sure, to have incontestable proofs. Then, as though she had an intuition of my desire, she loosened her hold of me all of a sudden and whispered: "Kiss me—won't you?"

I raised myself up and looked at her for a moment before kissing her; I was struck by the air of fatigue, almost of exhaustion, that was visible in her face, now more disintegrated, more irresolute than ever. It was as though she had undergone a superhuman strain while she had been speaking to me and caressing and embracing me; and as though she were preparing to undergo another, even more painful, during the kiss. Nevertheless I took her chin in my hand and was on the point of bringing my lips close to hers. At that moment the telephone rang. "It's Battista," she said, disengaging herself with obvious relief and running into the next room. From the sofa, where I remained seated, I saw her, through the open door, take off the receiver and say: "Yes . . . yes, he's here, I'll get him at once . . . How are you?"

A few words followed, from the other end of the line. Then, with a gesture of understanding towards me from where she stood, she said: "We were just talking about you and your new film . . ."

A few more mysterious remarks. In a calm voice she said: "Yes, we must meet as soon as possible. Now I'll get Riccardo for you."

I got up, went into the other room and took the receiver. Battista told me, as I had foreseen, that he was expecting me next day, in the afternoon, at his office. I said I would come and exchanged a few more words with him, then replaced the receiver. Only then did I become aware that Emilia had left the room while I was speaking. And I could not help thinking that she had gone away because she had succeeded in persuading me to agree to the appointment with Battista; there was now no further need either of her presence or of her caresses.

3

I WENT TO MY APPOINTMENT next day, at the time arranged. Battista's offices occupied the entire first floor of an ancient palace, once the abode of a patrician family and now—as so often happens—the business premises of a number of commercial concerns. The great reception-rooms, with their frescoed, vaulted ceilings and stuccoed walls, had been divided by him, with simple wooden partitions, into a number of little rooms with utilitarian furniture; where once old paintings with mythological or sacred subjects had hung, there were now large, brightly colored posters; pinned up everywhere were photographs of actors and actresses, pages torn out of picture papers, framed certificates of festival awards, and other similiar adornments generally to be found in the offices of film companies. In the anteroom, against a background of faded sylvan frescoes, rose, throne-like, an enormous counter of green-painted metal, from behind which three or four female secretaries welcomed visitors. Battista, as a producer, was still young, and he had made good progress in recent years with films inferior in quality but commercially successful. His company, modestly called "Triumph Films," was, at the moment, regarded as one of the best.

At that hour the anteroom was already thronged, and, with the experience of film types I had now acquired, I could classify all the visitors with certainty at the first glance: two or three script-writers, recognizable by their look of mingled fatigue and industriousness, by the copybooks they held under their arms, and by the style of their clothes, at the same time both smart and careless; one or two elderly cinema organizers or managers, looking exactly like country estate-agents or cattle-brokers; two or three girls, aspiring actresses or rather walkers-on, young and pretty perhaps, but as it were spoiled in advance by their ambitions, with their studied expressions, their excessive make-up, and their way of dressing from which all simplicity was banished; and finally a few nondescript individuals such as are always to be found in producers' anterooms—out-of-work actors, suggestion-mongers, cadgers of various kinds. All these people were walking up and down on the dirty mosaic floor, or lounging on the high-backed, gilt chairs round the walls, yawning, smoking and chattering in low voices. The secretaries, when they were not speaking on one of the numerous telephones, remained motionless behind the counter, staring into vacancy with eyes that, from sheer boredom and absence of thought, looked glassy and almost squinting. From time to time a bell rang with violent and unpleasant shrillness; and then the secretaries would rouse themselves, call out a name, and one of the visitors would jump up hastily and disappear through a white-and-gold double door.

I gave in my name and then went and sat down at the far end of the room. I was now in a state of mind just as desperate as the day before, but much calmer. Immediately after my conversation with Emilia, and on thinking it over, I had convinced myself once and for all that she had lied to me in saying that she loved me; but for the moment, partly from discouragement, partly from a punctilious wish to force her into the complete and sincere explanation which

I had not yet obtained, I gave up the idea, provisionally at least, of acting in accordance with my conviction. I had therefore decided not to refuse Battista's new job, although I knew, for certain, that—like all the rest of my life, indeed—it now served no purpose. Later on, I thought, as soon as I had managed to wrest the truth from Emilia, there would always be time to break off the job and throw up everything. In some ways, in fact, I preferred this second and more clamorous solution to the first. The scandal and loss would to some extent emphasize my desperation and, simultaneously, my absolute determination to be done with all hesitation and compromise.

As I say, I felt calm; but it was the calm of apathy and listlessness. An uncertain evil causes anxiety because, at the bottom of one's heart, one goes on hoping till the last moment that it may not be true; a certain evil, on the other hand, instils, for a time, a kind of dreary tranquillity. I felt tranquil, but I knew that soon I should no longer be so: the first phase, the phase of suspicion, was over—or so I thought; soon would begin the phase of pain and revolt and remorse. All this I knew, but I knew also that between these two phases there could be an interlude of deathly calm, just like the false, stifling calm that precedes the second and worse period of a thunderstorm.

Then, as I waited to be shown into Battista's room, it flashed across my mind that so far I had restricted myself to making certain of the existence, or non-existence, of Emilia's love. But now, it seemed to me, I knew for certain that she no longer loved me. Therefore, I thought, almost surprised at my new discovery, I could now turn my mind to a new problem—that of the reason why she had ceased to love me. Also, once I had divined the reason, it would be easier for me to force her to an explanation.

I must admit that, as soon as I had put the question to myself, I was struck by a sense of incredulity, almost of extravagance. It was too unlikely, too absurd: it was quite impossible that Emilia could have a reason for ceasing to love me. From what source I derived this assurance, I could not have said; just as, on the other hand, I could not have said why—since according to me she could have no reason for ceasing to love me—it was quite obvious that she did *not* love me. I reflected for a few moments, bewildered by this contradiction between my head and my heart. Finally, as one does with certain problems in geometry, I said to myself: "Let us grant it absurd that there should be a reason, although there cannot but be a reason. And let us see what it can possibly be."

I have noticed that the more doubtful one feels the more one clings to a false lucidity of mind, as though hoping to clarify by reason that which is darkened and obscured by feeling. It gave me pleasure, at that moment when instinct produced such contradictory replies, to have recourse to a reasoned investigation, like a detective in a crime story. Someone has been killed; the motive for which he may have been killed must be sought out; if the motive is discovered it will be easy to trace the criminal . . . I argued, then, that the motives might be of two kinds: the first depending upon Emilia, the second upon me. And the first, as I immediately realized, were all summed up in a single one: Emilia no longer loved me because she loved someone else.

It appeared to me, on first thinking about it, that this supposition could be rejected without more ado. Not merely had there been nothing in Emilia's behavior in recent times to lead one to suspect the presence of another man in her life, but there had been actually the opposite—an increase both in the amount of time spent alone and in her dependence upon me. Emilia, I knew, was almost always at home, where she spent her time reading a little or telephoning to her mother or attending to her household chores; and for her distractions, whether going to the cinema, or taking a walk, or dining at a restaurant, she depended almost entirely upon me. Certainly her life had been more varied, and, in its modest way, more sociable, immediately after our marriage, when she still retained a few friendships from the time when she was a girl. But the bonds of such friendships had very soon been loosened; and she had clung ever more tightly to me, depending upon me, as I have already mentioned, more and more, to an extent that was sometimes, for me, positively embarrassing. This dependence, moreover, had not weakened in the least, with the weakening of her feeling for me; she had not sought, even in the most innocent way, to find a substitute for me nor in the slightest degree to prepare for such an eventuality: in the same way as before—except that the love had gone out of it—she would sit at home waiting for my return from work, and she still depended on me for her few amusements. There was, in fact, something pathetic and unhappy about this loveless dependence of hers; it was as if somebody, by nature faithful, went on being faithful even when the reasons for faithfulness had disappeared. In a word, although she no longer loved me, it was almost certain that she had no one but me in her life.

Furthermore, another observation I had made caused me to exclude the possibility that Emilia might be in love with some other man. I knew her, or thought I knew her, very well. And I knew that she was incapable of telling lies, in the first place because of a certain rough and intolerant frankness in her, owing to which all faleshood appeared to her, not so much repugnant, as tedious and laborious; and secondly because of her almost complete lack of imagination, which did not permit of her grasping anything that had not really happened or that did not exist in concrete form. In view of this characteristic I was sure that, in the event of her having fallen in love with another man, she would have found it best to tell me at once; and, into the bargain, with all the brutality and unconscious cruelty of the more or less uneducated class to which she belonged. Of reticence and silence she was perhaps capable, as indeed she was now proving herself to be with regard to her change of feeling towards me; but it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, for her to invent a double life in order to conceal adultery—I mean, the appointments with dressmakers and milliners, the visits to relations or friends, the delays at entertainments or the traffic hold-ups to which women usually have recourse in similar circumstances. No, her coldness towards me did not mean warmth towards another. And if there was a reason, as indeed there must be, it was to be sought, not in her life, but in mine.

I was so deeply absorbed in these reflections that I did not notice that one of the secretaries was standing in front of me, smiling and repeating: "Signor Molteni . . . Dr. Battista is waiting for you." Finally I pulled myself together, and, interrupting my investigations for the time being, hurried off to the producer's office.

He was sitting at the far end of a spacious room with a frescoed ceiling and walls adorned with gilt plasterwork, behind a desk of green-painted metal, exactly like the secretaries' counter that encumbered the anteroom. I realize at this point that, though I have often spoken of him, I have not yet described him, and I think it may be expedient to do so. Battista, then, was the kind of man to whom his collaborators and dependents, as soon as his back was turned, referred to with charming names such as "the brute," "the big ape," "the great beast," "the gorilla." I cannot say that these epithets were undeserved, at least as regards Battista's physical appearance; however, partly owing to my dislike of calling anyone by a nickname, I had never succeeded in adopting them. This was also because these nicknames erred, in my opinion, in not taking into account one of Battista's highly important qualities, I mean his most unusual artfulness, not to stay subtlety, which was always present, though concealed under an apparent brutishness. Certainly he was a coarse, animal-like man, endowed with a tenacious, exuberant vitality; but this vitality expressed itself not only in his many and various appetites but also in an acuteness that was sometimes extremely delicate and calculating, especially in relation to the satisfaction of those appetites.

Battista was of medium height, but with very broad shoulders, a long body and short legs; whence the similarity to a large ape which had earned him the nicknames I have mentioned. His face, too, was a little like that of an ape: his hair, leaving the two sides of his forehead bare, came down rather low in the middle; thick eyebrows, with a sort of pensive mobility of their own; small eyes; a short, broad nose; and a large but lipless mouth, thin as a slit made by a knife and slightly protruding. Battista's figure was characterized by a stomach rather than a paunch; by which I mean that he habitually thrust out his chest and the upper part of his abdomen. His hands were short and thick and covered with black hair which continued upwards beyond his wrists into his sleeves: once when we had been at the sea together I had noticed that this hair bristled on his shoulders and chest and came right down to his belly. This man who looked so brutish expressed himself in a gentle, insinuating, conciliatory voice, with a polished, almost foreign accent, for Battista was not a Roman. It was in this unforeseeable, surprising voice that I detected an indication of the astuteness and subtlety of which I have spoken.

Battista was not alone. In front of the desk was sitting someone whom he introduced to me by the name of Rheingold. I knew very well who he was, although this was the first time I had met him. Rheingold was a German director who, in the pre-Nazi film era, had directed, in Germany, various films of the "colossal" type, which had had a considerable success at the time. He was certainly not in the same class as the Pabsts and Langs; but, as a director, he was worthy of respect, not in the least commercial, and with ambitions with which one might not perhaps agree but which were nevertheless serious. After the advent of Hitler, nothing had been heard of him. It was said that he was working in Hollywood, but no film under his signature had been shown in recent years in Italy. And now here he was, popping up strangely in Battista's office. While the latter was talking to us, I looked at Rheingold with curiosity. Have you ever, in some old print, seen the face of Goethe? Just so, just as noble, as regular, as Olympian, was the face of Rheingold; and, like that of Goethe, it was framed in a fringe of clean and shining silver hair. It was, in fact, the head of a great man; except that, on closer examination, I became aware that its majesty and nobility were lacking in substance: the features were slightly coarse and at the same time spongy, flimsy, as though made of cardboard, like those of a mask; giving, in fact, the impression that there was nothing behind them, like the faces of the enormous heads that are carried round by tiny little men at carnival-times. Rheingold rose to shake me by the hand, giving a little bow with his head only, and a slight click of the heels, in the stiff German manner; and then I realized that he was quite a small man, although his shoulders, as if to match the majesty of his face, were very wide. I noticed also that, as he greeted me, he smiled at me in an extremely affable manner, with a broad smile like a half-moon, showing two rows of very regular and altogether too-white teeth which I at once imagined, I don't know why, to be false. But immediately afterwards, when he sat down again, the smile disappeared in a flash, leaving no traces—just as the moon is obliterated in the sky by a cloud passing in front of it—giving place to a very hard, unpleasant expression, both dictatorial and exacting.

Battista, following his usual method, started off in a roundabout way. Nodding towards Rheingold, he said: "Rheingold and I were just talking about Capri . . . do you know Capri, Molteni?"

"Yes, a little," I answered.

"I have a villa in Capri," went on Battista, "and I was just saying to Rheingold what an enchanting place Capri is. It's a place where even a man like me, taken up as I am with business affairs, feels himself becoming a bit of a poet." It was one of Battista's favorite habits to profess an enthusiasm for fine and beautiful things, for the things, in fact, that belong to the sphere of the ideal; but what disconcerted me most was that this enthusiasm, to which he called attention in so sure a manner, was perfectly sincere, though always, somehow or other, connected with purposes that were not at all disinterested. After a moment, as though moved by his own words, he resumed: "Luxuriant nature, a marvellous sky, a sea that is always blue . . . and flowers, flowers everywhere. I think that if I were like you, Molteni, a writer, I should like to live in Capri and take my inspiration from it. It's strange that painters, instead of painting the Capri landscape, should give us all these ugly pictures that no one can understand. In Capri, pictures are ready made, so to speak . . . All you have to do is to put yourself in front of the landscape and copy it . . ."

I said nothing; I looked at Rheingold out of the corner of my eye and saw him nod his approval, his smile hanging in the middle of his face like a sickle moon in a cloudless sky. Battista went on: "I'm always intending to spend a few months there, away from business, without doing anything, but I never manage it. We in the city here lead a life that is altogether against nature. Man isn't made to live amongst files of papers, in an office . . . and the people of Capri do, in fact, look far happier than we do. You ought to see them in the evening, when they come out to take a walk—young men and girls, smiling, serene, attractive gay. It's because they have a life made up of small things, with small ambitions, small interests, small troubles. My goodness, how lucky they are!"

There was silence again. Then Battista resumed: "As I was saying, I have a villa in Capri and I'm never there, worse luck. I must have stayed there just about a couple of months altogether, since I acquired it. I was just saying to Rheingold that the villa would be the best possible place for writing the script of the film. The landscape would inspire you . . . especially because, as I was pointing out to Rheingold, the landscape is in harmony with the subject of the film."

"One can work anywhere, Signor Battista," said Rheingold; "certainly Capri might be useful . . . especially if, as I think, we take the exterior shots of the film in the Bay of Naples."

"Exactly . . . Rheingold, however, says he would rather go to a hotel, because he has his own habits and, besides, he likes to be alone at certain times and to think over the work by himself. But I think that you, Molteni, might stay at the villa, together with your wife. It would be a pleasure for me, if at last there was someone living there . . . The villa has every convenience, and you would have no difficulty in finding a woman to look after you . . ."

At once I thought of Emilia, as always; and I felt that a stay in a lovely villa in Capri might perhaps solve many difficulties. What I am saying is true: all of a sudden, for no reason, I was absolutely certain that it would indeed solve them. It was therefore with genuine warmth that I thanked Battista. "Thank you," I said. "I also think that Capri would be the best possible place for writing the script . . . and my wife and I would be delighted to stay at your villa."

"Excellent; that's understood, then," said Battista, holding up his hand, with a gesture that vaguely offended me, as if to check a flood of gratitude which I really had no intention of letting loose. "That's understood; you'll go to Capri and I'll come and join you there. And now let us talk a little about the film."

"High time too!" I thought, and looked closely at Battista. I had, now, an obscure feeling of remorse at having accepted his invitation so promptly. I did not know why, but I guessed instinctively that Emilia would have disapproved of my hastiness. "I ought to have told him I must think it over," I said to myself with some irritation, "that I must first consult my wife." And the warmth with which I had accepted the invitation seemed to me misplaced, a thing to be almost ashamed of. Battista, meanwhile, was saying: "We're all agreed that something new in the way of films has got to be found. The after-the-war period is now over, and people are feeling the need of a new formula. Everyone—just to give an example—is a little tired of neo-realism. Now, by analyzing the reasons for which we have grown tired of the neo-realistic film, we may perhaps arrive at an understanding of what the new formula might be."

I knew, as I have already mentioned, that Battista's favorite way of attacking a subject was always an indirect one. He was not a cynical type of man, or at any rate he was determined not to appear so. Thus it was very difficult for him to speak openly, as did many other producers franker than he, about financial matters: the question of profit, no less important to him than to the others—in fact, perhaps even more important—remained always shrouded in a discreet obscurity; and if—let us suppose—the subject of a film did not seem to him sufficiently profitable, he would never say, like the others: "This subject won't put a penny into the cash-box," but rather: "I don't like this subject for such and such a reason"; and the reasons were always of an aesthetic or moral order. Nevertheless, the question of profit was always the final touchstone; and the proof of this was to be seen when, after many discussions upon the beautiful and the good in the art of the film, after a good many of what I called Battista's smoke-screens, the choice fell, invariably, upon the solution that held the best commercial possibilities. Owing to this, I had for some time now lost all interest in the considerations, often extremely long and complicated, put forward by Battista on films beautiful or ugly, moral or immoral; and I waited patiently for him to reach the point where, always and inevitably, he came to a halt—the question of economic advantage. And this time I thought: "He certainly won't say that the producers are tired of the neo-realistic film because it isn't profitable . . . let's see what he will say." Battista, in fact, went on, after a moment's reflection: "In my opinion, everyone is rather tired of the neo-realistic film mainly because it's not a healthy type of film."

He stopped and I looked sideways at Rheingold: he did not blink an eyelid. Battista, who had intended, by pausing, to stress the word "healthy," now went on to explain it. "When I say that the neo-realistic film is not healthy, I mean that it is not a film that inspires people with courage to live, that increases their confidence in life. The neo-realistic film is depressing, pessimistic, gloomy. Apart from the fact that it represents Italy as a country of ragamuffins—to the great joy of foreigners who have every sort of interest in believing that our country really *is* a country of ragamuffins—apart from this fact which, after all, is of considerable importance, it insists too much on the negative sides of life, on all that is ugliest, dirtiest, most abnormal in human existence. It is, in short, a pessimistic, unhealthy type of film, a film which reminds people of their difficulties instead of helping them to overcome them."

I looked at Battista and once again I remained uncertain as to whether he really believed the things he was saying or only pretended to believe them. There was sincerity of a kind in what he said; perhaps it was only the sincerity of a man who easily convinces himself of the things that are useful to him; nevertheless, sincerity there was. Battista went on speaking, in that voice of strangely inhuman timbre, almost metallic even in its sweetness. "Rheingold has made a suggestion which interested me . . . He has noticed that in recent times films with subjects taken from the Bible have been highly successful. They have been, in fact, the best money-makers," he observed at this point, almost pensively, but as though opening a parenthesis to which he himself wished no importance to be paid. "And why? In my opinion, because the Bible remains always the *healthiest* book that has ever been written in this world . . . And so Rheingold said to me, the Anglo-Saxon races have the Bible, and you Mediterranean peoples, on the other hand, have Homer. Isn't that so?" He interrupted himself and turned towards Rheingold, as if uncertain that he was quoting him correctly.

"That's it, exactly," confirmed Rheingold, not without an expression of slight anxiety on his smiling face.

"To you Mediterranean peoples," continued Battista, still quoting Rheingold, "Homer is what the Bible is to the Anglo-Saxons . . . And so why shouldn't we make a film from, for instance, the *Odyssey*?"

There was silence. Astonished, I wanted to gain time, and so I asked, with an effort: "The whole *Odyssey*, or an episode from the *Odyssey*?"

"We've discussed the matter," Battista answered promptly, "and we've come to the conclusion that it will be best to take into consideration the *Odyssey* as a whole. But that doesn't matter. What matters most," he went on, raising his voice, "is that, in re-reading the *Odyssey,* I've at last understood what I've been looking for for so long without realizing it . . . something that I felt could not be found in neo-realistic films . . . something, for instance, that I've never found in the subjects that you, Molteni, have suggested to me from time to time recently . . . something that I, in fact, have been feeling—without being able to explain it to myself—have been feeling was needed in the cinema as it is needed in life —poetry."

I looked again at Rheingold: he was still smiling, perhaps a little more broadly than before, and was nodding his approval. I hazarded, rather drily: "In the *Odyssey,* as one knows, there is plenty of poetry. The difficulty is to get it over into the film."

"Quite right," said Battista, taking up a ruler from the desk and pointing it at me; "quite right . . . but to do that, there are you two, you and Rheingold. I know there's poetry in it . . . it's up to you to pull it out."

I replied: "The *Odyssey* is a world in itself . . . one can get out of it what one wants. It depends what point of view one brings to it."

Battista seemed now to be disconcerted by my lack of enthusiasm, and was examining me with ponderous intentness as though trying to guess what purposes I was concealing behind my coldness. At last he appeared to be postponing his scrutiny to a later occasion, for he rose to his feet and, making his way around the table, started walking up and down the room, his head held high, his hands thrust into the hip pockets of his trousers. We turned to look at him; and, still walking up and down, he resumed: "What struck me above all in the *Odyssey* is that Homer's poetry is always spectacular . . . and when I say spectacular, I mean it has something in it that infallibly pleases the public. Take for example the Nausicaa episode. All those lovely girls dressed in nothing at all, splashing about in the water under the eyes of Ulysses who is hiding behind a bush. There, with slight variations, you have a complete Bathing Beauties scene. Or take Polyphemus: a monster with only one eye, a giant, an ogre . . . why, it's King Kong, one of the greatest pre-war successes. Or take again Circe, in her castle . . . why, she's Antinea, in *Atlantis*. That's what I call spectacle. And this spectacle, as I said, is not merely spectacle but poetry too . . ." Much excited, Battista stopped in front of us and said solemnly: "That's how I see a film of the *Odyssey* produced by Triumph Films."

I said nothing. I realized that, to Battista, poetry meant something very different from what I understood by it; and that, according to his conception of it, the *Odyssey* of Triumph Films would be a film based upon the big Biblical and costume films of Hollywood, with monsters, naked women, seduction scenes, eroticism and grandiloquence. Fundamentally, I told myself Battista's taste was still that of the Italian producers of the time of D'Annunzio; how indeed could it have been otherwise? In the meantime he had made his way back around the desk and sat down again, and was saying to me: "Well, Molteni, what do you say to it?"

Anyone who knows the world of the cinema knows that there are films of which one can be certain, even before a single word of the script has been written, that they will be brought to a final conclusion; while there are others which, even after the contract has been signed and hundreds of pages of the screen-play completed, will equally surely never be finished. So now I, with the experience of the professional script-writer, recognized immediately, even while Battista was speaking, that this *Odyssey* film was, precisely, one of those which are much discussed but, in the end, never made. Why should this be so? I could not have said; perhaps it was because of the inordinate ambitiousness of the work, perhaps it was Rheingold's physical appearance, so majestic when he was seated, so meager when he stood up. I felt that, like Rheingold, the film would have an imposing beginning and a paltry conclusion, thus justifying the well-known remark about the Siren: *desinit in piscem,* she ends up in a fish. And then, why did Battista want to make such a film? I knew that he was fundamentally very prudent, and determined to make money without taking risks. Probably, I thought, beneath his desire there lay the hope of obtaining solid financial support, perhaps even American support, by playing upon the great name of Homer—the Bible, as Rheingold had remarked, of the Mediterranean peoples. But on the other hand I knew that Battista, no different from other producers in this respect, would find some pretext, supposing the film were never made, for refusing to give me any remuneration for my hard work. It always happened like that: if the film failed to come off, payments also failed to come off, and the producer, generally, suggested transferring the emolument for the already completed script to other work to be done in the future; and the poor script-writer, forced by necessity, did not dare to refuse. I said to myself, therefore, that I must in any case forearm myself by asking for a contract and, above all, an advance; and that to achieve this goal there was only one method: to place difficulties in the way, to set a high price upon my collaboration. So I answered, tartly: "I think it's a very good idea."

"You don't seem, however, to be very enthusiastic."

I replied, with a sufficient show of sincerity: "I am afraid it may not be my kind of film . . . it may be beyond my powers."

"Why?" Battista seemed irritated now. "You've always said you wanted to work at a film of quality . . . and now that I give you the chance, you draw back."

I tried to explain what I meant. "You see, Battista, I feel myself to be cut out chiefly for psychological films . . . whereas this one, as far as I understand, is to be a purely spectacular film . . . of the type, in fact, of the American films taken from Biblical subjects."

This time Battista had no time to answer me, for Rheingold, in a wholly unexpected manner, broke in. "Signor Molteni," he said, summoning back his usual half-moon smile on to his face, rather like an actor suddenly sticking on a pair of false mustaches; and leaning forward slightly, with an obsequious, almost fawning expression. "Signor Battista has expressed himself very well and has given a perfect picture of the film I intend to realize with his help. Signor Battista, however, was speaking as a producer, and was taking into account, more especially, the spectacular elements. But if you feel yourself cut out for psychological subjects, you ought, without any possible doubt, to do this film . . . because this film is neither more nor less than a film on the psychological relationship between Ulysses and Penelope . . . I intend to make a film about a man who loves his wife and is not loved in return."

I was disconcerted by this, all the more so because Rheingold's face, illuminated by his usual artificial smile, was very close to me and seemed to cut me off from any possible loophole of escape: I had to reply, and at once. And then, just as I was about to protest: "But it's not true that Penelope does not love Ulysses," the director's phrase "a man who loves his wife and is not loved in return" brought me suddenly back to the problem of my relations with Emilia—the relations, precisely, of a man who loved his wife and was not loved in return; and, at the same time, through some mysterious association of ideas, it brought to the surface of my memory a recollection which—as I immediately became aware—seemed to provide an answer to the question I had put to myself in the anteroom, while I was waiting to see Battista: why did Emilia no longer love me?

The story I am now going to tell may seem lengthy: in reality, owing to the almost vision-like speed of the recollection, the whole thing lasted only an instant. Well then, as Rheingold bent his smiling face towards me, I saw myself, in a flash, in my study at home, in the act of dictating a script. I had just reached the end of a dictation which had lasted several days, yet I still could not have said whether the typist was pretty or not; and then a minute incident opened my eyes, so to speak. She was typing out some sentence or other when, bending down to look at the sheet of paper over her shoulder, I realized that I had made a mistake. I leaned forward and tried to correct the error myself by tapping out the word with my finger on the keys. But, as I did so, without meaning to I lightly touched her hand which, I noticed, was very large and strong and strangely in contrast with the slightness of her figure. As I touched her hand, I was conscious that she did not withdraw it; I composed a second word, and again, this time perhaps not without intention, touched her fingers. Then I looked into her face and saw that she was looking straight back at me, with an expression of expectation, almost of invitation. I also noticed with surprise, as if for the first time, that she was pretty, with her little full mouth, her capricious nose, her big black eyes and her thick, curly, brushed-back hair. But her pale, delicate face wore a discontented, scornful, angry expression. One last detail: when she spoke, saying with a grimace: “I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking,” I was struck by the dry, precise, decidedly disagreeable tone of her voice. I looked at her then, and saw that she sustained my regard perfectly well—in fact, she returned it in a manner that was positively aggressive. I must then have shown some sign of emotion and indeed have given a mute response, for from that moment, for several days, we never stopped looking at each other. Or rather, it was she who never stopped looking at me, impudently, with deliberate effrontery, at every opportunity, pursuing my eyes when they avoided hers, seeking to hold them when our eyes met, delving into them when they came to a halt. As always happens, these glances, at first, were few and far between; then they became more and more frequent; finally, not knowing how to escape them I was reduced to walking up and down behind her as I dictated. But the tenacious coquette found a means of circumventing this obstacle by staring at me in a big mirror hanging on the wall opposite, so that, each time I raised my eyes, I found hers waiting there to meet them. In the end, the thing that she wanted to happen, happened: one day when, as usual, I was leaning over from behind her to correct a mistake, I looked up at her, our eyes met, and our mouths were joined for one moment in a swift kiss. The first thing she said, after the kiss, was characteristic: "Oh, at last! . . . I was really beginning to think you'd never make up your mind." Indeed she now seemed sure that she held me in her clutches, so sure that, immediately after the kiss, she did not trouble to demand any more but went back to her work. I was left with a feeling of confusion and remorse: I found the girl attractive, certainly, otherwise I should not have kissed her; but it was also certain that I was not in love with her and that the truth of the matter was that she had forced the kiss from me by working upon my male vanity with her petulant and, to me, flattering persistence. Now she went on typing without looking at me, her eyes lowered, prettier than ever with her round, pale face and her big mop of black hair. Then she made—on purpose, perhaps—another mistake, and I again leaned over her, seeking to correct it. But she was watching my movements, and, as soon as my face was close to hers, she turned in a flash and threw her arm round my neck, seizing hold of me by one ear and pulling my mouth sideways against hers. At that moment the door opened and Emilia came in.

What happened then, I think it is hardly necessary to relate in detail. Emilia withdrew at once, and I, after saying very hurriedly to the girl, "Signorina, that's enough for today, you can go home now," almost ran out of the study and joined Emilia in the living-room. I expected a scene of jealousy, but all Emilia said was: "You might at least wipe the red off your lips." I did so, and then sat down beside her and tried to justify myself, telling her the truth. She listened to me with an indefinable expression of suspicious, but fundamentally indulgent, mistrust, and at last remarked that, if I was truly in love with the typist, I had only to say so and she would agree to a separation forthwith. But she spoke these words without harshness and with a kind of melancholy gentleness, as though tacitly inviting me to contradict them. Finally, after many explanations and much desperation on my part (I was positively terrified at the thought of Emilia leaving me), she appeared to be convinced and, with some show of resistance and reluctance, consented to forgive me. That same afternoon, in the presence of Emilia, I telephoned to the typist to inform her that I should not need her again. The girl tried to wrest an appointment from me at some outside meeting-place; but I gave her an evasive answer, and have never seen her since.

This recapitulation, as I said, may seem lengthy, whereas in reality the scene flashed across my memory in the form of a lightning-like image: Emilia opening the door at the moment when I was kissing the typist. And I was at once surprised at not having thought of it before. There could be no doubt, I now felt, that things had taken the following course. Emilia, at the time, had shown that she paid no importance to the incident, whereas in reality, perhaps unconsciously, she had been profoundly disturbed by it. Afterwards she had thought about it again, weaving round that first memory an ever-thicker, ever-tighter cocoon of increasing disillusionment; so that that kiss, which for me had been nothing more than a passing weakness, had produced in her mind a trauma (to use a psychiatrist's term), that is, a wound which time, instead of healing, had increasingly exacerbated. While I was pondering these things there must no doubt have been a very dreamy expression on my face, for all at once, through the kind of thick mist that enveloped me, I heard Rheingold's voice asking in alarm: "But do you hear what I am saying, Signor Molteni?"

The mist dissolved in an instant, and I shook myself and saw the director's smiling face stretching out towards me. "I'm sorry," I said. "My mind was wandering. I was thinking of what Rheingold said: a man who loves his wife and is not loved in return . . . but . . . but . . ." Not knowing what to say, I made the objection that had come into my mind in the first place, "But Ulysses in the poem *is* loved in return by Penelope . . . in fact, in a sense, the whole of the *Odyssey* hinges on this love of Penelope's for Ulysses."

Rheingold, I saw, swept aside my objection with a smile. "Loyalty, Signor Molteni, not love. Penelope is loyal to Ulysses but we do not know how far she loved him . . . and as you know, people can sometimes be absolutely loyal without loving. In certain cases, in fact, loyalty is a form of vengeance, of blackmail, of recovering one's self-respect. Loyalty, not love."

I was struck once again, by what Rheingold said; and again I could not help thinking of Emilia, wondering whether, in place of loyalty and indifference, I would not perhaps have preferred betrayal and the consequent remorse. Yes, undoubtedly I should: if Emilia had betrayed me and had felt guilty towards me, it would have been possible for me to face her with assurance. But I had now demonstrated to myself that Emilia was not betraying me; that it had been I myself, in fact, who had betrayed her. As my mind was wandering in this new direction I was aroused by the voice of Battista saying: "Well then, Molteni, it's agreed that you'll work with Rheingold."

"Yes," I answered with an effort, "yes, it's agreed."

"Excellent," declared Battista with satisfaction. "Then let us arrange it like this. Rheingold has to go to Paris tomorrow morning and will be there for a week. You, Molteni, during that week, will make me a summary of the *Odyssey* and bring it to me . . . and as soon as Rheingold comes back from Paris, you'll go together to Capri and start on the work at once."

After this conclusive remark, Rheingold rose to his feet, and mechanically I rose also. I realized that I ought to speak about the contract and the advance, and that, if I did not do so, Battista would have got the better of me; but the thought of Emilia upset me and, even more, the strange resemblance between Rheingold's interpretation of Homer and my own personal affairs. I managed nevertheless to murmur, as we went off towards the door: "And how about the contract?"

"The contract is ready," said Battista in an entirely unexpected manner and in a casual, magnanimous tone of voice, "and the advance is also ready, together with the contract. All you have to do, Molteni, is to go to my secretary, and to sign the one and take away the other."

Surprise almost stunned me. I had expected, as had happened in the case of other film-scripts, that there would be the usual maneuvers on the part of Battista to cut down my remuneration or delay its payment; yet here he was paying me at once, without any discussion. As we all three passed into the adjoining room, which was the manager's office, I could not help murmuring: "Thank you, Battista. You know I need it."

I bit my lip: in the first place it was not altogether true that I needed it—not urgently, anyhow, as my remark implied; and besides, I felt that I ought not to have spoken those words, though I did not quite know why. Battista's reply confirmed my regret. "So I guessed, my dear boy," he said, clapping me on the back with a protective, fatherly gesture, "and I saw that you had what you wanted." Then, to a secretary who was sitting at a desk, he added: "This is Signor Molteni . . . for that contract and the advance."

The secretary rose to his feet and at once opened a portfolio and took from it an already drawn-up contract to which was pinned a check. Battista, after shaking Rheingold by the hand, clapped me on the shoulder again, wishing me good luck with my new job, and then went back into his office. "Signor Molteni," said Rheingold, coming up to me in his turn and holding out his hand, "we shall meet again on my return from Paris. In the meantime you'll be making that summary of the *Odyssey* . . . and then taking it to Signor Battista and discussing it with him."

"Very well," I said, looking at him in some surprise because I thought I had seen him give me a sort of understanding wink.

Rheingold noticed my look and, all of a sudden, took me by the arm and put his mouth close to my ear. "Don't worry," he whispered to me hurriedly; "don't be afraid. Let Battista say what he likes. We'll make a psychological film, a purely psychological film." I noticed that he pronounced the word "psychological" in the German way—*"psüchologhical"*; then he smiled at me, shook my hand with a brisk nod of the head and a click of the heels, and walked away. Watching him go, I started when I heard the secretary's voice saying to me: "Signor Molteni . . . will you be so good as to sign here?"

9

IT WAS ONLY SEVEN O'CLOCK, and when I reached home, I called in vain to Emilia through the deserted flat: but she had gone out and would not be back till dinner-time. I was disappointed and in a way felt positively bitter. I had counted on finding her and talking to her at once about the incident of the typist; I was sure that that kiss had been at the bottom of our differences, and, feeling myself full of a new boldness, was confident that I could dispel the misunderstanding with a few words and then tell her the good news of the afternoon—my contract for the *Odyssey,* the advance I had received, our departure to Capri. It is true that my explanation was postponed only for a couple of hours, yet, all the same, I had an irritating feeling of disappointment and almost of foreboding. At that moment I felt sure of my own case; but I wondered whether, in two hours' time, I should have the power to be equally convincing. It will be seen that, although I pretended to myself that I had at last found the key to the difficulty, that is, the true reason why Emilia had ceased to love me, fundamentally I was not at all sure of it. And this unfortunate absence on her part was quite enough to fill me with apprehension and ill-humor.

Listless, demoralized and perplexed, I went into my study and looked mechanically in the bookshelf for the translation of the *Odyssey*. Then I sat down at the desk, put a sheet of paper into my typewriter and, having lit a cigarette, prepared to write the summary. I thought that the work would soothe my anxiety or at least make me forget it: I had tried this remedy on other occasions. So I opened the book and read, slowly, the whole of the first canto. Then at the top of the page I typed the title: *Synopsis of the Odyssey,* and, underneath it, began: "The Trojan War has been over for some time. All the Greek heroes who took part in it have now gone home. All except Ulysses, who is still far from his own island and his dear ones." At this point, however, a doubt as to whether or not it was suitable to introduce into my summary the Council of the Gods in the course of which this same return of Ulysses to Ithaca was discussed, caused me to interrupt my work. The council was important, it seemed to me, because it introduced into the poem the notion of Fate, and of the vanity and, at the same time, the nobility and heroism of human effort. Cutting out the council meant cutting out the whole supramundane aspect of the poem, eliminating all divine intervention, suppressing the figures of the various divinities, so charming and poetical in themselves. But there was no doubt that Battista would not want to have anything to do with the gods, who would seem to him nothing more than incompetent chatterboxes who made a great fuss about deciding things that could perfectly well be decided by the protagonists. As for Rheingold, the ambiguous hint he had given of a "psychological" film presaged no good towards the divinities: psychology obviously excludes Fate and divine intervention; at most, it discovers Fate in the depths of the human spirit, in the dark intricacies of the so-called subconscious. The gods, therefore, would be superfluous, because neither spectacular nor psychological . . . I thought about these things with ever-growing confusion and weariness; every now and then I looked at the typewriter and said to myself that I must get on with my work, but I could not bring myself to it and sat without moving a finger; and finally I fell into a profound but blank meditation, sitting there at the desk, my eyes staring into vacancy. In reality I was not so much meditating as stirring together in my mind the cold, acid flavors of the various feelings, all of them disagreeable, that agitated me; but, in my bewildered, weary, vaguely irritable state, I did not succeed in defining them to myself in any precise manner. Then, like an air-bubble that rises suddenly to the still surface of a pond after remaining for who knows how long under water, this reflection forced its way into my mind: "Now I shall have to submit the *Odyssey* to the usual massacre, to reduce it to a film, and once the script is finished, this book will go back into its shelf along with all the others that have served me for other screen-plays. And in a few years' time, when I am looking for another book to cut to pieces for another film, I shall come upon it and say: 'Ah, yes, of course, that was when I was doing the script of the *Odyssey* with Rheingold. And then nothing was done about it . . . nothing was done, after talking for months, morning and evening, day in and day out, about Ulysses and Penelope and the Cyclops and Circe and the Sirens. Nothing was done because . . . because there wasn't enough money.' " At this thought I was conscious, yet again, of a feeling of profound disgust with the trade I was forced to follow. And again I was conscious, with acute pain, that this disgust was born of the certainty that Emilia no longer loved me. Hitherto I had worked for Emilia, and for Emilia only; since her love had failed me, my work had no further object.

I do not know how long I remained like that, hunched up motionless in my chair in front of the typewriter, with my eyes turned towards the window. At last I heard the front door bang, at the other end of the flat, and then the sound of footsteps in the living-room, and I knew that Emilia had returned. I did not move, but remained where I was. Finally I heard the door of the study open behind me and Emilia's voice asking: "Are you in here? What are you doing? Are you working?" Then I turned around.

She was standing in the doorway with her hat still on her head and a parcel in her hand. I said at once, with a spontaneity which astonished me after so many doubts and apprehensions: "No, I'm not working . . . I was just wondering whether I ought or ought not to accept this new script of Battista's."

She closed the door and came and stood beside me, near the desk. "Have you been to see Battista?"

"Yes."

"But you haven't come to an agreement . . . Doesn't he offer you enough?"

"Yes, he offers enough . . . and we have come to an agreement."

"Well, then . . . But perhaps you don't like the subject?"

"No, it's a good subject."

"What is the subject?"

I looked at her for a moment before replying: as usual she appeared absent-minded and indifferent, and one could see she was only speaking from duty. "It's the *Odyssey*," I answered briefly.

She put down the parcel on the desk, lifted her hand to her head and slowly took off her hat, shaking out her pressed-down hair. But her face was blank and inattentive: either she had not understood that I was speaking of the famous poem, or—which was more probable—the title, though not entirely unknown, conveyed nothing to her. "Well," she remarked at last, almost impatiently, "don't you like it?"

"Yes, I told you I did!"

"Isn't the *Odyssey* the thing one learns at school? Why don't you want to do it?"

"Because I don't feel like doing it, now."

"But surely, only this morning, you had decided to accept the job?"

All of a sudden I realized that the moment had come for another, and this time really decisive, explanation. I jumped to my feet, took hold of her by the arm and said: "Let's go in there, into the living-room; I must talk to you."

She was frightened, more, perhaps, by the almost frenzied force with which I gripped her arm than by the tone of my voice. "What's the matter with you? are you mad?"

"No, I'm not mad . . . Let's go in there and talk."

Meanwhile I was dragging her, forcibly, across the study. I opened the door and thrust her into the other room, in the direction of an armchair. "Sit down there!" I myself sat down facing her, and said: "Now let's talk."

She looked at me dubiously, and still a little frightened. "Well, talk then, I'm listening."

I began in a cold and colorless voice. "Yesterday—do you remember?—I told you that I had no desire to do this script because I was not sure that you loved me . . . and you answered that you did love me and that I ought to do it. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, that's so."

"Well," I declared resolutely, "I believe you were telling me a lie . . . I don't know why—perhaps because you were sorry for me, perhaps in order to serve your own interests—"

"But what interests?" she interrupted me harshly.

"The interest you may have," I explained, "in remaining in this flat which you like so much."

Her reaction was such that I was struck by its violence. She sat up straight in her chair and said, in a louder voice than usual: "Who told you that? This flat doesn't matter to me in the least, not in the very least. I'm perfectly ready to go back and live in a furnished room . . . It's quite obvious you don't know me . . . It means nothing to me."

These words gave me a feeling of acute pain, pain such as a man might feel who sees some gift, for which he has faced bitter sacrifices, despised and insultingly spurned. After all, this home of ours, of which she spoke with such contempt, represented my life for the last two years; for this home I had abandoned the work I most wished to do, I had renounced my dearest ambitions. I asked, in a thin, almost incredulous voice: "It means nothing to you?"

"Nothing, absolutely nothing." Her voice sounded flat and unmusical, from some unexplained passion of contempt. "Nothing . . . do you understand? nothing!"

"But yesterday you said you cared very much about staying in this flat."

"I only said it to please you . . . because I thought it was you who cared."

I was inwardly amazed: so it was I, I who had sacrificed my theatrical ambitions, I who had never held such things to be of great importance, it was I who cared about the flat! I saw that she had now entered, for some reason unknown to me, upon the path of deceit, and I told myself that it would serve no purpose to exasperate her by contradicting her and reminding her of how much she had once desired what she now made such a show of despising. In any case, the flat was a mere detail; what really mattered was something quite different. "Never mind the flat," I said, trying to control my voice and adopt a conciliating, sensible tone; "it's not the flat I wanted to talk about, but your feeling towards me. You lied to me yesterday when you said, for some reason or other, that you loved me. You lied to me, and that's why I have no further desire to work for the cinema . . . because I did it entirely for you, and if you no longer love me I have no reason for going on with it."

"But what makes you think I lied to you?"

"Nothing and everything. We talked about that yesterday, too, and I don't want to begin all over again. There are things that can't be explained, but which one feels . . . and I feel you no longer love me . . ."

She showed, suddenly, a first impulse of sincerity. "Why do you want to know these things?" she asked unexpectedly, in a sad, tired voice, looking away towards the window: "why? Let it alone . . . it will be better for us both."

"Well then," I persisted, "you admit that I may be right?"

"I admit nothing. I only want to be left in peace. Leave me in peace!" There was a hint of tears in these last words. Then she added: "I'm going now. I want to change my clothes"; and she rose and went off towards the door. But I caught her as she went, seizing her by the wrist. I had made this gesture more than once before: when she had risen, saying she must leave me, and I, as she passed in front of my chair, had taken hold of her by her long, slender wrist. But formerly I had seized hold of her because I felt a sudden desire for her, and she knew it and would stop obediently, awaiting my second gesture, which consisted in embracing her legs and burying my face in her lap, or in pulling her down on to my knees. All this would end in lovemaking—after a little resistance and a few caresses—just where we found ourselves, in the armchair or on the divan close by. This time, however, my intention was different, and I could not help being aware of it, with some bitterness. She did not resist but remained standing close beside me, looking down at me from her great height. "Really," she said, "what *do* you want, I should like to know?"

"I want the truth."

"You want to insist on making trouble between us—that's what you want!"

"Then you admit that the truth would not please me?"

"I admit nothing."

"But you said it yourself—making trouble between us . . ."

"Oh well, I had to say something . . . Now let me go!"

She did not struggle, however, nor did she move; she simply waited for me to release her. I felt I should have preferred violent rebellion to this cold, contemptuous patience; and, as though hoping, by a renewal of the old gesture which once had been the prelude to love, to arouse in her a feeling of affection, I let go of her wrist and put my arms around her legs. She was wearing a long, very ample skirt, full of folds; and as I embraced her I felt it shrink and tighten around her fine straight legs, hard and muscular, like the ample sails of a ship round the mast. And then I felt desire for her, in a way that was almost painful because of its suddenness and because of the sense of impotent despair that accompanied it. Looking up at her, I said: "Emilia, what have you against me?"

"I haven't anything at all . . . and now let me go!"

I clasped her legs more tightly with my two arms, pressing my face into her lap. Generally, when I made this gesture, I would feel, after a moment or two, the big hand that I loved so much being laid on my head in a slow, tentative caress. This would be the signal of her emotional response and of her willingness to do my pleasure. But this time her hand remained dangling and inert. This attitude on her part, so different from her former one, smote deep into my heart. I released her, and taking her by the wrist again, cried: "No, you shan't go . . . You've got to tell me the truth . . . this very minute . . . You shan't leave the room until you've told me the truth."

She went on looking down at me from above: I could not see her but I seemed to feel her hesitating gaze on my bowed head. At last she said: “Well, you’ve asked for it. All I wanted was to go on as we are. It’s you who’ve asked for it: it’s true, I don’t love you now. There’s the truth for you!”

It is possible to picture the most disagreeable things and to picture them with the certainty that they are true. But the confirmation of such fancies, or rather, of such certainties, always comes unexpectedly and painfully, just as though one had not pictured anything beforehand. Really and truly I had known all the time that Emilia no longer loved me. But to hear her say it had, nevertheless, a chilling effect upon me. She did not love me now: those words, so often imagined, assumed, when pronounced by her lips, an entirely new significance. They were fact, not fancy, however mixed the latter might have been with certainty. They had a weight, a size, which they had never before had in my mind. I do not remember clearly how I received this declaration. Probably I gave a start, like someone who goes under an icy shower-bath knowing that it is icy, and yet, when he feels it, gives a start just the same, as if he had never known at all. Then I tried to recover myself, to show myself, somehow, reasonable and objective. I said, as gently as I could: “Come here . . . sit down and explain to me why you don’t love me.”

She obeyed and sat down again, this time on the divan. Then she said, rather irritably: “There’s nothing to explain. I don’t love you now and that is absolutely all I have to say.”

I realized that, the more I sought to show myself reasonable, the more deeply did the thorn of my unspeakable pain sink into my flesh. My face was twisted into a forced smile as I answered: “You must at least admit that you owe me an explanation. Even when one sacks a servant, one explains the reason.”

“I don’t love you any more: that’s all I have to say.”

“But why? You did love me, didn’t you?”

"Yes, I loved you . . . very much . . . but now I don't any more."

"You loved me very much?"

"Yes, very much; but it's all over now."

"But why? There must be a reason."

"Perhaps there may be . . . but I don't know what it is; I only know that I don't love you."

"Don't repeat it so often," I exclaimed almost in spite of myself, and raising my voice a little.

"It's you who make me repeat it. You refuse to be convinced and so I have to go on repeating it."

"I'm convinced now."

There was silence. Emilia had lit a cigarette and was smoking it with downcast eyes. I was bending forward with my head between my hands. Finally I said: "If *I* tell you the reason—will you recognize it?"

"But I don't know it, myself."

"But if I tell it to you, perhaps you'll recognize it."

"All right then, come on . . . tell me."

"Don't speak to me like that!" I wanted to cry to her, wounded by her curt, indifferent tone. But I restrained myself and, trying to maintain my reasonable air, began: "Do you remember that girl who came here some months ago to type out a script for me . . . that typist? You caught us kissing. It was a stupid weakness on my part. But there was only that one kiss, I swear it; it was the first and the last . . . and I've never seen her since. Now tell me the truth—wasn't it perhaps that kiss that first came between us? Tell me the truth—wasn't that kiss the first thing that made you lose your love for me?"

As I spoke, I watched her carefully. Her first movement was one of surprise, and of consequent denial: it was as if my supposition seemed to her completely absurd. Then, as I saw clearly, a sudden idea made her change expression. She answered slowly: "Well, suppose it *was* that kiss. Now that you know, does it make you feel any better?"

At once I was absolutely certain that it had not been the kiss, as she was now insisting that I should believe. It was quite clear: at first Emilia had been downright astonished at my supposition, so remote was it from the truth; then, a sudden calculation had made her accept it. I could not but think that the true reason of her loss of love must be much more serious than that one kiss which had led to nothing. It was a reason, probably, that she did not wish to reveal because of some remaining regard for me. Emilia was not unkind, as I knew, and did not like hurting anyone. Evidently the real reason would be hurtful to me.

I said gently: "It's not true, it wasn't the kiss."

She was astonished. "Why! But I've just told you it was."

"No, it wasn't the kiss . . . it was something else."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You know perfectly well."

"No, on my word of honor, I don't know."

"And I tell you you do know."

She became impatient, almost like a mother with a child. "Why do you want to know so many things? It's typical of you . . . Why do you want to pry into everything? What does it matter to you?"

"Because I prefer the truth, whatever it is, to lies. And above all, if you don't tell me the truth, I might imagine anything . . . I might imagine something really nasty."

She looked at me for a moment in silence, in a strange manner. "What does it matter to you?" she went on then. "You have a clear conscience, haven't you?"

"Yes, certainly I have."

"Then how can the rest matter to you?"

"It's true, then," I persisted. "It really is something nasty."

"I didn't say that. I only said that, if you have a clear conscience, all the rest ought not to matter to you."

"It's true that I have a clear conscience . . . but that doesn't mean anything. Sometimes even one's conscience deceives one."

"But not yours, surely?" she said, with a faint irony that did not, however, escape me, and that seemed to me even more wounding than her indifference.

"Yes, even mine."

"Well, well, I must go," she said suddenly. "Have you anything else to say to me?"

"No, you shan't go until you've told me the truth."

"I've already told you the truth: I don't love you."

What an effect they had upon me, those four words! I turned pale, and implored her, miserably: "I asked you before not to say that again. It hurts too much!"

"It's you who compel me to repeat it . . . It certainly doesn't give me any pleasure to say it."

"Why do you want to make me believe it's because of that kiss that you've stopped loving me?" I pursued, following the train of my reflections. "A kiss is nothing at all. That girl was a perfectly ordinary little fool and I've never seen her since. You know and understand all that. No, the truth is that you've stopped loving me"—now I was not so much speaking as spelling out my words carefully in an attempt to express my own difficult and obscure intuition—"because something has happened . . . something that has changed your feelings towards me . . . something, in fact, that has perhaps changed, first and foremost, the idea you had of me, and consequently your feelings as well."

"It must be admitted that you're intelligent!" she said, in a tone of genuine surprise, almost of praise.

"It's true, then?"

"I didn't say it was true. I only said you were intelligent."

I sought about in my mind, feeling that the truth was, so to speak, on the tip of my tongue. "To put it briefly," I insisted, "before a certain thing happened, you thought well of me . . . afterwards, you thought badly . . . and therefore ceased to love me."

"It might possibly have happened like that."

All of a sudden I had a horrible feeling: this reasonable tone of mine, I realized, was false. I was not reasonable, I was suffering, in fact, I was desperate, furious, I was shattered; and why in the world should I keep up a reasonable tone? I don't know what happened to me at that moment. Before I knew what I was doing, I had jumped to my feet, shouting: "Don't imagine I'm here just to keep up a bright conversation!" and had leaped on top of her and seized her by the throat and thrown her back on to the divan and was yelling into her face: "Tell me the truth . . . tell it once and for all. Come on!"

Beneath me the big, perfect body that I loved so much was struggling this way and that, and she had grown red and swollen in the face; I must have been squeezing her throat tightly, and I knew that, in my heart, I wanted to kill her. I kept on saying: "Tell me the truth, once and for all," and at the same time I squeezed with redoubled force and thought: "I'm going to kill her . . . but better dead than my enemy!" Then I felt her trying to kick me in the belly with her knee, and indeed she succeeded in doing so, and with such violence that it took my breath away. This blow hurt me almost as much as the phrase: "I don't love you"; and it was in truth the blow of an enemy, an enemy who seeks to harm his adversary as much as possible. At the same time my murderous hatred ebbed, I relaxed my grip somewhat, and she struggled free, giving me a push that almost threw me off the divan. Then, before I could recover myself, she cried out in a voice of exasperation: "I despise you . . . that's the feeling I have for you and that's the reason why I've stopped loving you. I despise you and you disgust me every time you touch me. There's the truth for you . . . I despise you and you disgust me!"

I was standing up now. My eye, followed at once by my hand, moved towards a massive glass ashtray that stood on the table. She certainly thought I intended to kill her, for she uttered a groan of fear and covered her face with her arm. But my guardian angel stood by me. I do not know how I managed to control myself; I put the ashtray back on the table and went out of the room.

10

As i have already mentioned, Emilia had not had a good education: she had attended only the first elementary school and then, for a few years, the normal school; then she had broken off her studies and had learned to do typing and shorthand, and at sixteen was already employed in a lawyer's office. She came, it is true, of what is called a good family—that is, of a family which in the past had been in easy circumstances, having owned property in the neighborhood of Rome. But her grandfather had dissipated his heritage in unsuccesful commercial speculations, and her father, up to the day of his death, had been merely a minor official in the Ministry of Finance. So she had grown up in poverty, and, as regards her education and manner of thinking, could almost be described as belonging to the working class; and, like many women of that class, she seemed to have nothing to fall back upon except her common sense, which was so solid as to appear sometimes like stupidity or, to say the least, narrowness of ideas. Yet by virtue solely of this common sense she sometimes succeeded, in a wholly unexpected and, to me, mysterious, manner, in formulating comments and appreciations that were extremely acute; just as, indeed, happens with people of the working class, who are closer to nature than others, and whose consciousness is not obscured by any convention or prejudice. Certain things she said merely because she had thought them over seriously, with sincerity and candor, and indeed her words had the unmistakable ring of truth. But, since she was not aware of her own candor, she felt no complacency about it; thus in a way confirming, by her very modesty, the genuineness of her judgment.

And so, that day, when she cried out: "I despise you," I was immediately convinced that these words, which in the mouth of another woman might have meant nothing, when pronounced by her meant exactly what they said: she really did despise me and now there was nothing more to be done. Even if I had known nothing of Emilia's character, the tone in which she had uttered the phrase would have left me in no doubt: it was the tone of the virgin word that springs directly from the thing itself and pronounced by someone who had perhaps never spoken that word before, and who, urged on by necessity, had fished it up from the ancestral depths of the language, without searching for it, almost involuntarily. So indeed may a peasant, among a number of mutilated, worn-out, dialect expressions, sometimes utter a remark that sparkles with crystal-clear moral wisdom—a remark which in a different mouth might not be surprising, but which, in his, is astonishing and appears almost unbelieveable. "I despise you." These three words, I noticed with bitterness, held the same absolutely genuine tone as those other words, so very different, which she had spoken to me the first time she had confessed her love: "I love you very much."

I was so sure of the sincerity and truth of those three words that, once I was alone in my study, I started walking up and down without thinking of anything, my hands trembling, my eyes distraught, not knowing what to do. Emilia's words seemed to be penetrating more deeply every minute into my sensibility, like three thorns, with sharp and increasing pain; but beyond this pain, of which I was acutely conscious, I was incapable of understanding anything. The thing that made me suffer most, of course, was the knowledge that I was not merely not loved but actually despised; and yet, utterly unable as I was to discover any reason at all, even the slightest, for this contempt, I had a violent feeling of injustice and, at the same time, a fear that, in reality, there was no injustice about it, and that the contempt had an objective foundation of which I was myself unaware, though to others it was quite obvious. I had a respectable opinion of myself, mixed with just a dash of pity, as of a man who is not too fortunate, a man upon whom Fate has not smiled as she ought to have done; but not in any way contemptible, quite the contrary. And now, behold, those words of Emilia's were completely upsetting this idea, were making me suspect, for the first time, that I did not know myself or judge myself as I really was, and that I had always flattered myself beyond all truth.

Finally I went into the bathroom and put my head under the tap, and the jet of cold water did me good; my brain had seemed to be red hot, just as though Emilia's words had set fire to it, discovering in it a combustible quality hitherto unknown. I combed my hair, washed my face, re-tied my tie, then went back into the living-room. But the sight of the table ready laid in the window embrasure aroused in me a feeling of rebellion: it was impossible that we should sit down as we did every day and eat together, in that room which still echoed with the words that had so deeply affected me. At that very moment Emilia opened the door and looked in, her face now recomposed into its usual serene, placid expression. Without looking at her I said: "I don't want to dine at home this evening . . . Tell the maid we're going out, and then get dressed at once . . . we'll go and dine out somewhere . . ."

She answered, in some surprise: "Why, it's all ready . . . the whole thing will have to be thrown away."

A sudden rage swept over me, and I shouted: "That's enough. Throw away anything you like, but go and get dressed because we're going out." Still I did not look at her, but I heard her murmur: "What a way to behave!" Then she closed the door again.

A few minutes later we left the house. In the narrow street, flanked on both sides by modern buildings like our own, with façades full of balconies and verandas, among all the big, expensive motor-cars, my own small, utilitarian car awaited us—a recent acquisition which, like the flat, had still, to a great extent, to be paid for out of the earnings of future film-scripts. I had only had it a few months, and I still had that feeling of slightly childish vanity which such a possession can at first inspire. But that evening, as we walked towards the car, side by side, not looking at each other, in silence and not touching each other, I could not help thinking: "This car, like the flat, represents the sacrifice of my ambitions . . . and that sacrifice has been in vain." And in truth, just for a moment, I had a sharp sense of the contrast between the luxurious street in which everything looked new and expensive, our flat which looked down upon us from the third floor, the car that awaited us a few yards further on, and my own unhappiness, which made all these advantages appear useless and wearisome.

When I had got into the car, I waited until Emilia was seated and then stretched out my arm to shut the door. Usually, in making this movement, I brushed against her knees, or, turning a little, gave her a light, quick kiss on the cheek. This time, however, almost spontaneously I avoided touching her. The door closed with a bang and for a moment we sat motionless and silent. Then Emilia asked: "Where are we going?" I thought for a few seconds and replied at random: "Let's go to the Via Appia."

Slightly surprised, she said: "But it's too early for the Via Appia . . . it'll be cold and there won't be anyone there."

"Never mind . . . *we* shall be there."

She was silent, and I drove off quickly towards the Appian Way. Coming down from our own quarter, we crossed the center of the city and went out by the Via dei Trionfi and the Passeggiata Archeologica. We passed the ancient mossy walls, the gardens and vegetable-plots, the villas hidden in trees along the first part of the Appian Way. Then we came to the entrance to the Catacombs, lit by two feeble lamps. Emilia was right; it was still too early in the year for the Via Appia. In the restaurant with the archaeological name, when we came into the big sham-rustic room adorned with amphoras and broken columns, we found nothing but tables and a quantity of waiters. We were the only customers, and I could not help thinking that, in that chilly deserted room, surrounded by the tiresome solicitude of too many attendants, we should have no hope of solving the problem of our relationship—on the contrary. I remembered that it was in that very restaurant, two years before, at the time of our deepest love, that we had constantly dined; and all at once I understood why, amongst so many, I had chosen it, so dismal at that season of the year, and so forlorn.

The waiter was standing, menu in hand, on one side, and on the other the wine-waiter was bowing, with the wine-list. I began ordering our dinner, making suggestions to Emilia, and bending forward slightly towards her like an attentive, gallant husband. She kept her eyes lowered and answered without looking up, in monosyllables: "Yes, no, all right." I also ordered a bottle of the choicest wine, although Emilia protested that she did not want to drink anything. "I'll drink it," I said. The wine-waiter gave me an understanding smile, and the two waiters went off together.

I do not wish to give a description here of our dinner in all its details but merely to depict my own state of mind, a state of mind which was entirely new to me that evening but which was thenceforth to become normal in my relations with Emilia. They say that, if we manage to live without too great an effort, it is entirely owing to the automatism which makes us unconscious of a great part of our movements. In order to take one single step, it seems, we displace an infinite number of muscles, and yet, thanks to this automatism, we are unaware of it. The same thing happens in our relations with other people. As long as I believed myself to be loved by Emilia, a kind of happy automatism had presided over our relations; and only the final completion of any course of conduct on my part had been illuminated by the light of consciousness, all the rest remaining in the obscurity of affectionate and unnoticed habit. But now that the illusion of love had faded, I discovered myself to be conscious of every one of my actions, even the smallest. I offered her something to drink, I passed her the salt, I looked at her, I stopped looking at her: each gesture was accompanied by a painful, dull, impotent, exasperated consciousness. I felt myself completely shackled, completely numbed, completely paralysed; at each act, I found myself wondering: am I doing right, am I doing wrong? I had, in fact, lost all confidence. With complete strangers one can always hope to regain it. But with Emilia, it was an experience of the past, a thing defunct: I could have no hope whatever.

And so, between us, there was a silence that was only broken from time to time by some quite unimportant remark: "Will you have some wine? Will you have some bread? Some more meat?" I should like to describe the intimate quality of this silence because it was that evening that it was established for the first time between us, never to leave us again. It was, then, a silence that was intolerable because perfectly negative, a silence caused by the suppression of all the things I wanted to say and felt incapable of saying. To describe it as a hostile silence would be incorrect. In reality there was no hostility between us, at least not on my side; merely impotence. I was conscious of wanting to speak, of having many things to say, and was at the same time conscious that there could now be no question of words, and that I should now be incapable of finding the right tone to adopt. With this convinction in my mind, I remained silent, not with the relaxed, serene sensation of one who feels no need to speak, but rather with the constraint of one who is bursting with things to say and is conscious of it, and runs up against this consciousness all the time, as against the iron bars of a prison. But there was a further complication: I felt that this silence, intolerable as it was, was nevertheless, for me, the most favorable condition possible. And that if I broke it, even in the most cautious, the most affectionate manner, I should provoke discussions even more intolerable, if possible, than the silence itself.

But I was not yet accustomed to keeping silent. We ate our first course, and then our second, still without speaking. At the fruit, I was unable to hold out any longer, and I asked: "Why are you so quiet?"

She answered at once: "Because I've nothing to say."

She seemed neither sad nor hostile; and these words, too, held the accent of truth. I went on, in a didactic tone: "A short time ago you said things that would need hours of explanation."

Still in the same sincere tone, she said: "Forget those things. Try and imagine I never said them."

I asked hopefully: "Why should I forget them? I should forget them only if I knew for certain that they are not true

. . . if they were just words that escaped you in a moment of anger."

This time she said nothing. And again I hoped. Perhaps it was true: it was as a reaction from my violence that she had said she despised me. Cautiously, I insisted: "Now confess, those horrible things you said to me today were not true . . . and you said them because at that moment you thought you hated me and you wanted to hurt me."

She looked at me and was again silent. I thought I detected—or was I wrong?—a faint glistening of tears in her big dark eyes. Encouraged, I put out my hand and took hers as it lay on the tablecloth, saying: "Emilia . . . they weren't true, then?"

But now she pulled away her hand with unusual violence, drawing back not only her arm but, it seemed to me, her whole body. "They *were* true."

I was struck by her accent of complete, albeit disconsolate, sincerity as she answered. It was as though she were aware that, at that moment, a lie would have put everything to rights again, anyhow for some time, at least in appearance; and clearly, just for a second, she had been tempted to tell such a lie. Then, on reflection, she had rejected the idea. I felt a new and sharper stab of pain, and, bending my head, murmured through my clenched teeth: "But do you realize there are certain things that can't be said to anyone, just like that, without any justification . . . not to anyone, least of all to your own husband?"

She said nothing; all she did was to gaze at me, with apprehension almost; and indeed, my face must have been distorted with rage. At last she replied: "You asked for it and I told you."

"But it's up to you to explain."

"How do you mean?"

"You've got to explain why . . . why you despise me."

"That I shall never tell you . . . not even if I were on the point of death."

I was struck by her unusually resolute tone. But my surprise did not last long. I was filled with a fury which now permitted no time for reflection. "Tell me," I insisted, and again I seized her hand, but this time in a far from caressing manner, "tell me . . . why do you despise me?"

"I've already said I shall never tell you."

"Tell me . . . if not, I shall hurt you." Beside myself with rage, I twisted her fingers. She looked at me in surprise for a moment, then screwed up her mouth in pain; and, immediately afterwards, the contempt of which hitherto she had merely spoken, showed itself clearly in her expression. "Stop it," she said roughly; "so you want to hurt me now, as well." I noticed this "as well," in which there appeared to be an allusion to other severities that I wished to inflict upon her, and was left breathless. "Stop it . . . aren't you ashamed of yourself? The waiters are watching us."

"Tell me why you despise me."

"Don't be a fool; leave me alone."

"Tell me why you despise me."

"Ow!" She wrenched her fingers away with a violent jerk that knocked a tumbler off the table. There was a sound of broken glass, and she jumped up and walked away towards the door, saying loudly: "I'm going to wait for you in the car . . . while you pay the bill."

She went out, and I was left sitting motionless where I was, humiliated, not so much from shame (it was true, as she had said, that all those idle waiters had been watching us the whole time and had not missed a single word or gesture of our quarrel) as by the strangeness of her behavior towards me. Never before had she spoken to me in that tone, never before had she abused me. The words "as well" continued, moreover, to echo in my ears like a new and unpleasant enigma that had to be solved, amongst so many others: how and when had I inflicted those things upon her of which, with her "as well" she was now complaining? At last I summoned the waiter, paid the bill, and followed her out.

Outside the restaurant, I found that the weather, which all day had been cloudy and uncertain, had turned to a thick drizzle. A little farther on, in the darkness of the open space, I could just see the figure of Emilia standing beside the car: I had locked the doors, and she was waiting there, patiently, in the rain. I said, in a shaky voice: "I'm sorry, I'd forgotten I had locked the car"; and heard her voice, quite quietly, answer: "Never mind . . . it's not raining much." Once again, at those forgiving words, hope of a reconciliation reawakened, crazily, in my heart: how was it possible to be filled with contempt, if one spoke in a voice so quiet, so kindly? I opened the door, got into the car, and she got in beside me. I started the engine, and said to her, in a voice that seemed to me, all of a sudden, strangely hilarious, almost jovial: "Well, Emilia, where would you like to go?"

She answered without turning, looking straight ahead: "I don't know . . . wherever you like."

Without waiting, I drove off. As I said, I now had a kind of jovial, carefree, hilarious feeling; it seemed almost as though, by turning the whole affair into a joke, by substituting lightness for seriousness and, frivolity for passion, I might succeed in solving the problem of my relations with Emilia. I do not know what it was that possessed me at that moment: perhaps desperation, like an over-potent wine, had gone to my head. I said, in an amused, deliberate playful tone: "Let's go wherever luck takes us . . . we'll just see what happens."

I felt absurdly awkward as I said these words; rather like a cripple trying to demonstrate a dance-step. But Emilia did not speak, and I abandoned myself to this new humor of mine, which I imagined to be an inexhaustible stream but which very soon turned out to be no more than a thin and timid trickle. I was now driving along the Via Appia, of whose cypresses and brick ruins and white marble statues and Roman pavement, with its big, irregular paving-stones, I caught a glimpse now and then by the light of the headlamps on the road in front, through the thousand glistening threads of rain. I went straight on for a little and then said, in a tone of false elation: "Let's forget, for once, who we are, and imagine we're two young students looking for a quiet corner, far away from indiscreet eyes, where they can make love in peace."

Still she said nothing, and I, encouraged by her silence, went a short distance farther along the road and then brought the car suddenly to a stop. It was pouring with rain now; the windshield-wipers, going backwards and forwards on the glass, did not move fast enough to sweep away the streams of water. "We're two young students," I said again in an uncertain voice; "I'm called Mario and you're Maria . . . and we've at last found a quiet place though it's rather wet. But inside the car we're all right . . . Give me a kiss." As I said this, with the decisiveness of a drunken man, I put my arm around her shoulders and tried to kiss her.

I don't know what I was hoping for: what had occurred in the restaurant should have made me understand what I ought to expect. At first Emilia tried to withdraw herself, with quite a good grace and in silence, from my embrace; then, when I persisted and, taking her chin in my hand, tried to turn her face towards mine, she thrust me harshly away. "Are you crazy?" she said. "Or are you drunk?"

"No, I'm not drunk," I murmured; "give me a kiss."

"I wouldn't dream of it," she answered with honest indignation, thrusting me away again. After a moment she went on: "And then you wonder that I tell you I despise you . . . when you behave like this . . . after what has happened between us."

"But I love you."

"I don't love *you.*"

I felt ridiculous, but in a distressed kind of way, like someone who realizes he has been forced into a position which has the double disadvantage of being both comic and irreparable. But I was not yet disposed to consider myself beaten. "You're going to give me a kiss; if you won't do it for love, I'll make you do it," I muttered in a voice that was meant to be brutal and masculine. And I threw myself upon her.

She said nothing this time, but she opened the door, and I fell forward on to the empty seat. She had jumped out of the car and run away down the road, despite the rain which was now falling very heavily.

I paused for a moment in astonishment, confronted by this empty seat. Then I said to myself: "I'm an idiot," and I too got out of the car.

It was raining really hard, and when I put my foot to the ground I felt myself plunge up to the ankle in a puddle. Exasperated, I called out: "Emilia . . . come on, come back here and don't worry. I won't touch you."

From some point that was indistinguishable in the darkness but not very far off, she answered: "Either you stop it, or I walk back into Rome."

I said, in a voice that trembled: "Come along, I promise anything you wish."

It was still raining heavily; the water was running down between the collar of my coat and my shirt-collar, wetting the back of my neck in a disagreeable fashion, and I felt it trickling over my forehead and the sides of my head. The headlamps of the car lit up only a small stretch of the road, together with a fragment of ruined Roman brickwork and a tall black cypress, truncated by the darkness; and, strain my eyes as I might, I was unable to see Emilia. Disheartened, I called again: "Emilia. Emillia . . ." and my voice ended on an almost tearful note.

At last she came forward out of the darkness into the beam of the headlamps, and said: "Do you promise you won't touch me?"

"Yes, I promise."

She went over and got into the car, adding: "What sort of a joke is this? I'm soaked through now . . . and my head's dripping. Tomorrow morning I shall have to go to the hairdresser."

I got into the car too, in silence, and we started off at once. She sneezed, then, a couple of times, very loudly, in a vindictive way, as if to let me see I had made her catch a cold. But I did not take up the challenge: I was driving now as though in a dream. An ugly dream, in which I was really called Riccardo and I had a wife who was called Emilia and I loved her and she did not love me, in fact, she despised me.

11

I AWOKE NEXT MORNING languid and aching, and with a deep and pervading sense of repugnance for what awaited me that day and the days following, whatever was destined to happen. Emilia was still asleep, in the bedroom; and I lay idle for a long time in the half-darkness, on the divan in the living-room, slowly and disgustedly regaining full consciousness of the reality which sleep had made me forget. Turning things over in my mind, I realized that I had to decide whether I would accept or refuse the *Odyssey* script; I had to know why it was that Emilia despised me; I had to find the way to win back Emilia's affections.

I have said that I was feeling exhausted, languid, inert; and this almost bureaucratic manner of summarizing the three vital questions of my life was, fundamentally, as I immediately realized, nothing more than an attempt to deceive myself with regard to an energy and a lucidity that I was very far from possessing. A general, a politician, a businessman will try, in this way, to get a close hold on the problems he has to solve, to reduce them to clear-cut objects, easily handled and lifeless. But I was not a man of that type; on the contrary. And, as for the energy and lucidity which I pretended to myself I possessed at that moment, I felt they would fail me completely once I passed from reflection to action.

I was well aware, however, of my insufficiency; and as I lay on my back on the divan with my eyes closed, I became conscious that, as soon as I attempted to formulate a reply to these three questions, my imagination no longer rested on the firm ground of reality but soared away into the vacant heaven of aspiration. Thus in imagination I saw myself doing the *Odyssey* script as though it were nothing at all; reaching an explanation with Emilia and discovering that the whole story of her contempt for me, in appearance so terrible, sprang in reality from a childish misunderstanding; and finally being reconciled with her. But, as I thought of these things, I realized that all I had in view was the happy conclusions which I longed to achieve: between these conclusions and the present position lay a gaping void which I was totally unable to fill—to fill, anyhow, with anything that had even the slightest quality of solidity and coherence. My ambition—to put it briefly—was to solve the problem of my present position in accordance with my highest desires, but I had not the least idea of how I should contrive to do it.

I dropped into a doze, no doubt, and then suddenly awoke once more and caught a glimpse of Emilia sitting at the foot of the divan, in her dressing-gown. The living-room was still in semi-darkness, the shutters being lowered; but on the table, close to the divan, a small lamp was burning. Emilia had come into the room, turned on the light and sat down near me without my noticing it.

Seeing her sitting there at the end of my bed, in a familiar attitude that reminded me of other, very different awakenings in happier times, I had a moment's illusion. Sitting up in bed, I stammered: "Emilia, do you love me?"

She waited a little before answering; then she said: "Listen, I've got to talk to you."

I felt suddenly cold; and I was on the point of answering her that I didn't want to talk about anything, and would she leave me in peace because I wanted to go to sleep. But instead, I asked: "Talk about what?"

"About us two."

"But there's nothing to be said," I replied, trying to overcome a sudden anxiety. "You've ceased to love me, in fact you despise me . . . that's all there is to it."

"No, I wanted to say," she announced slowly, "that I'm going back to my mother's—today. I wanted to tell you before I telephoned. There, now you know."

I had not at all foreseen this declaration, which, after all, considering what had happened the day before, was perfectly logical and to be expected. The idea that Emilia might leave me had never entered my mind, strange though that may seem; I thought that she had already reached the farthest limit of her hardness and cruelty towards me. And yet, here was that limit being passed at one bound, in a fashion that was totally unexpected. Scarcely understanding what she meant, I stammered: "You mean to leave me?"

"Yes."

For a moment I was silent; then, all at once, I felt an urgent need for action, driven on by the very sharpness of the pain that pierced me. I jumped from the divan and went, in pyjamas as I was, to the window, as though I intended to push up the shutters and let in the light; but then I turned back and shouted in a loud voice: "You can't go away like that. I don't want you to go."

"Don't talk like a child," she said in a reasonable manner. "We've got to separate; it's the only thing now for us to do. There's nothing left between us two—at least as far as I'm concerned. It'll be better for us both."

I do not remember at all what I did after she had spoken these words: or rather, I remember only a few sentences, a few movements. As though in the grip of some kind of delirium, I must have said and done things then of which I was not in the least conscious. I believe I went around and around the room with long strides, in my pyjamas, my hair all untidy, at one moment beseeching Emilia not to leave me, at another, explaining my own position, and then simply addressing my remarks to the air, as if I had been alone. The *Odyssey* film-script, the flat, the instalments to be paid, my sacrificed theatrical ambitions, my love for Emilia, Battista, Rheingold, all the aspects of my life and all the people in it were jumbled up in my mouth, in a rapid, incoherent rush of words, like the little pieces of colored glass at the bottom of a kaleidoscope when a violent hand shakes it. But at the same time I felt that this kaleidoscope was nothing but a poor, illusory thing—simply, in fact, a few bits of colored glass with no order or design about them; and now the kaleidoscope was broken, and the pieces of glass lay scattered on the floor, under my eyes. I had at the same time a very precise feeling of abandonment and of fear of being abandoned, but beyond this feeling I could not go; it oppressed me and prevented me not merely from thinking, but almost from breathing. My whole self rebelled violently at the thought of the separation and of the loneliness that would follow; but I realized that, in spite of the sincerity of this feeling of rebellion, I was not speaking convincingly; on the contrary. And indeed every now and then there was a rent in the clouds of alarm and terror that enveloped me, and then I would see Emilia sitting on the divan, still in the same place, and calmly answering me: "Riccardo, do be sensible: it's the only thing for us to do now."

"But I don't *want* you to go," I repeated for the last time, stopping in front of her; "I don't *want* you to."

"Why don't you want me to? Be logical."

I don't know what I said, and then I went to the far end of the room again and thrust my hands into my hair and pulled it. Then I saw that, in the state I was in, I was quite incapable not merely of convincing Emilia but even of expressing myself. I managed, with an effort, to control myself, and I went and sat down on the divan again and, bending forward and taking my head in my hands, asked: "When do you intend to go?"

"Today."

After saying this she rose to her feet and, taking no further notice of me as I sat hunched up with my head in my hands, went out of the room. I had not expected her to do this, just as hitherto I had not expected any of the things she had said and done; and for a moment I was astonished and almost incredulous. Then I looked round the room and felt a strange sensation, chilling in its exactness: the separation had already taken place and my loneliness had already begun. The room was the same as it had been a few minutes earlier, when Emilia was sitting on the divan; and yet, I realized, it was already quite different. It was, I thought, as though it had lost a dimension. The room was no longer the one I had been accustomed to see, knowing that Emilia was there; it was already the one I should be seeing for an unknown length of time, in the knowledge that Emilia was *not* there and never would be there again. There was a deserted look in the air, in the aspect of all the things, everywhere, and, strangely, this look did not go out from me towards the things but seemed to come from the things back towards me. I did not think all this so much as become aware of it in the depths of my dull, aching, dazed sensibility. Then I found I was crying, because I felt a sort of tickling sensation at the corner of my mouth, and, when I put up my finger, found my cheek was wet. I heaved a deep sigh and began to weep openly, violently. In the meantime I had risen and walked out of the room.

In the bedroom, in a light which, after the semi-darkness of the living-room, and being in pyjamas with my face bathed in tears, seemed dazzling and intolerable, Emilia was sitting on the untidy bed, listening at the telephone; and from a single word I knew that she was speaking to her mother. I thought I noticed that her face wore a perplexed, disconcerted expression; and then I sat down too, and, taking my face between my hands, went on sobbing. I did not very well know why I was crying like this: perhaps it was not only because my life was ruined, but because of some more ancient sorrow that had nothing to do with Emilia or with her decision to leave me. In the meantime Emilia was still listening at the telephone. Her mother was evidently making a long and complicated speech; and, even through my tears, I saw a disappointed, angry, bitter expression, swift and dark as the shadow of a cloud over a landscape, pass across her face. Finally she said: "All right, all right, I understand, we won't talk about it any more"; but she was interrupted by another long speech from her mother. This time, however, she had not the patience to listen right to the end and said suddenly: "You've told me that already, all right, I understand, good-bye." Her mother said something more, but Emilia repeated her "good-bye" and hung up the receiver, although her mother's voice was still audible through it. Then she raised her eyes in my direction, but without looking at me, as though dazed. With an instinctive movement I seized her hand, stammering: "Don't go away, please don't . . . don't go."

Children believe that tears have a decisive value as a form of sentimental persuasion; and so, in general, do women and persons of feeble and childish spirit. At that moment—like a child or a woman or other feeble creature—although I was weeping from genuine sorrow, I cherished some kind of hope that my tears would persuade Emilia not to leave me; and this illusion, if it comforted me a little, at the same time aroused in me a feeling almost of hypocrisy. It was just as if I were weeping on purpose, as if I intended to make use of my tears in order to blackmail Emilia. All at once I was ashamed; and, without waiting for Emilia's reply, I rose and left the room.

After a few minutes Emilia followed me. I had had time to recompose myself as best I could, to wipe my eyes, to put on a dressing-gown over my pyjamas. I had sat down in the armchair and was automatically lighting a cigarette which I did not want. She also sat down, and said at once: "Don't worry . . . don't be afraid. I'm not going away." But she said it in a bitter, despairing, apathetic voice. I looked at her: she kept her eyes lowered and appeared to be reflecting; but I noticed that the corners of her mouth were trembling and that her hands were occupied in turning back the edge of her dressing-gown, a gesture that showed she was disturbed and perplexed. Then, in a suddenly exasperated voice, she added: "My mother doesn't want me. She says she has rented my room. She had two already; now she has three and the whole house is full. She says she doesn't believe I'm really in earnest . . . that I ought to think it over. And so I don't know where to go. No one wants me . . . and I shall be compelled to stay with you."

I was struck by this last phrase, so cruel in its sincerity; and I think I gave a violent start, as if I had been stabbed. I could not help exclaiming, in resentment: "Why do you talk to me like that? 'Compelled' . . . What have I done to you? Why do you hate me so?"

Now it was she who was crying, as I perceived, although she was trying not to show it, by hiding part of her face with her hand. Then she shook her head and said: "You didn't want me to go away. Well, I'm staying. You ought to be pleased, oughtn't you?"

I got up from the armchair, sat down beside her on the divan and took her in my arms, although I was conscious, at the first contact, that she withdrew and resisted me. "Certainly I want you to stay," I said, "but not in that way, not 'compelled.' What have I done to you, Emilia, that you speak to me like that?"

"If you like, I'll go away," she answered; "I'll take a room somewhere . . . and you won't have to help me except just for a short time. I'll get a job as a typist again. And as soon as I find work, I shan't ask anything more from you."

"No, no," I cried. "I want you to stay. But, Emilia, not 'compelled' to stay, not 'compelled.' "

"It's not you who compel me," she replied, still weeping, "it's life."

Once again, as I clasped her in my arms, I felt a temptation to ask her why it was that she had ceased to love me, why, in fact, she despised me, and what had happened, what I had done to her. But now, perhaps as a counterpoise to her tears and bewilderment, I had regained, partly, my composure. I said to myself that this was not the moment to ask certain questions; that probably, by such questions, I should gain no ground at all; and that perhaps, in order to get at the truth, I ought to have recourse to different, and less brusque, stratagems. I waited a little, while she went on weeping in silence, her face turned away from me. "Look," I proposed, "let's not have any more discussions or explanations . . . they serve no purpose except to make us hurt each other. There's nothing more I want to know from you, at any rate for the present. But just listen to me for a moment: I have agreed, after all, to do the *Odyssey* script. But Battista wants us to do it somewhere in the Bay of Naples, where most of the exteriors will be taken . . . so we've decided to go to Capri. I'll leave you to yourself, there, I swear; in any case I won't be able to help doing so, as I shall be working all day with the director, and I may or may not see you at meal-times . . . Capri is an extremely beautiful place, and soon it will be possible to go swimming. You can rest, and bathe, and go for walks; it'll be good for your nerves, and you can think it all over and decide at your leisure what you want to do. Your mother is really right, after all: you ought to think it over. Then, in four or five months' time, you can tell me what you've decided, and then—and not till then—we'll talk about it again."

She kept her head turned sideways all the time, as if to avoid seeing me. Then she asked, in a somewhat comforted tone of voice: "And when should we be going?"

"At once . . . that is, in about ten days . . . as soon as the director comes back from Paris."

I was wondering now, as I held her against me and felt the roundness and softness of her breast against mine, whether I dared take the risk of kissing her. Actually, she was taking no sort of share in our embrace, but merely submitting to it. All the same, I deceived myself into thinking that this passivity was not entirely the result of indifference, and that it contained some element of interest. Then I heard her ask, still in the same comforted yet reluctant tone: "Where shall we stay, in Capri? In an hotel?"

I answered joyfully, thinking to give her pleasure: "No, we shan't go to an hotel . . . hotels are so tiresome. I've something better than an hotel; Battista is lending us his villa . . . We shall be able to use the villa the whole time I'm working at the script."

I was immediately aware—as I had feared a few days before, when I had too hastily accepted Battista's offer—that Emilia, for some reason of her own, did not like this plan. In fact, she at once freed herself from my embrace and, drawing away to one corner of the divan, repeated: "Battista's villa . . . and you've already accepted?"

"I thought you would be pleased," said I, trying to justify myself; "a villa is far better than an hotel."

"You've already accepted?"

"Yes, I thought I was doing right."

"And we shall be there with the director?"

"No, Rheingold is going to live at the hotel."

"Will Battista come there?"

"Battista?" I replied, vaguely surprised by this question. "I suppose he may come now and then . . . but only for a short time, a week-end, a day or two . . . just to see how our work is going."

This time she said nothing: but she fumbled in the pocket of her dressing-gown, took out her handkerchief and blew her nose. As she did so, she pushed aside her dressing-gown, which fell wide open almost up to her waist, uncovering her belly and her legs. She kept her legs tightly crossed, as if from modesty, but the white, youthful, plump belly flowed over on to the crossed, muscular thighs with a generous innocence that seemed more powerful than any rebuff. Looking at her then, as she seemed to be unconsciously offering herself, I felt a violent desire, of unparalleled spontaneity, which for a moment gave me the illusion that I might approach and possess her.

But I knew that, however great my longing might be, I would not do so; and all I did was to watch her, almost furtively, while she blew her nose—as though I were afraid of being discovered in the act of looking at her, and put to shame. As soon as she had finished, however, she remarked that I had now reached the point of looking secretly at my wife's nudity, with the excitement with which one looks at forbidden things, like a boy peeping through a crack into a bath house; and with a feeling of violent annoyance I put out my hand and pulled down the edge of her dressing-gown over her legs. She did not appear to be aware of my gesture but, putting her handkerchief back into her pocket, said in a voice that was now perfectly calm: “I’ll come to Capri, then . . . but on one condition—”

“Don’t talk to me of conditions. I don’t want to hear anything,” I cried, unexpectedly; “all right, we’ll go . . . but I don’t want to hear anything . . . and now go away, go away.” There must have been some kind of fury in my voice, for she immediately got up, as though she were frightened, and hurriedly left the room.

12

THE DAY ARRIVED when we were to leave for Capri. Battista had decided to accompany us to the island, to do us the honors of his house, as he himself expressed it; and that morning, when we came down into the street, we found the producer's high-powered red motor-car standing beside my own unpretentious little machine. It was now the beginning of June, but the weather was still unsettled, cloudy and windy. Battista, wearing a leather wind-jacket and flannel trousers, was standing beside the car talking to Rheingold, who—like a good German, thinking of Italy as the land of sunshine—had dressed very lightly for the occasion, with a peaked cap of white cloth and a striped linen suit of colonial cut. Emilia and I came out of the house followed by the porter and the maid carrying our suitcases; the other two at once left the car and came to meet us.

"Well, how shall we arrange ourselves?" asked Battista, after we had greeted each other. Then, without waiting for an answer: "I suggest that Signora Molteni comes with me, in my car, and Rheingold with you, Molteni. Then you can begin talking about the film during the journey . . . Because," he concluded with a smile, but in a serious voice, "the real work begins today . . . and I want to have the script in my hands in two months' time."

I glanced, automatically, at Emilia, and noticed on her face that curious look of disintegration of the features that I had observed on other occasions—the sign, in her, of perplexity and aversion. But I attached no importance to it; nor did I in any way connect this expression with Battista's proposal, which was in any case quite reasonable. "Very good idea," I said, forcing myself to appear cheerful, as the happy circumstance of this trip to the seaside seemed to demand. "Very good idea . . . Emilia will go with you and Rheingold with me . . . But I don't promise to talk about the script."

"I'm frightened of going fast," began Emilia, "and you, in that car of yours—you always drive too fast . . ." But Battista, impulsively, took her by the arm, crying: "No need to be frightened with me. Besides, what are you frightened of? I've got my own skin to think about, too"; and as he spoke he almost dragged her off towards his own car. I saw Emilia look at me with a bewildered, questioning air, and wondered whether I ought not to insist on taking her with me. But I thought Battista might take offence; motoring was a passion with him and, to tell the truth, he drove extremely well; and so I again said nothing. Emilia made one more feeble objection: "But I should rather have gone in my husband's car"; and Battista protested, facetiously: "Husband indeed! Why, you spend the whole day with your husband. Come on, or I shall be offended." In the meantime they had reached the car. Battista opened the door, Emilia got in and sat down, Battista was walking round the car to get in, himself, on the other side . . . Watching them in a rather dreamy way, I gave a start as Rheingold's voice said to me: "Are we ready, then?" I roused myself, got into my own car, and started the engine.

Behind me I heard the roar of Battista's car as it started; then it passed us and went off swiftly down the hill. I had scarcely time to catch a glimpse, through the rear window, of the head and shoulders of Emilia and Battista side by side; then the car turned a corner and vanished.

Battista had suggested that we should talk about the script during our journey. The suggestion was superfluous: when we had traversed the whole length of the city and I had turned into the Formia road at the moderate speed allowed by my small car, Rheingold, who so far had been silent, began: "Now tell me honestly, Molteni, you were afraid, that day in Battista's office, weren't you, that you were going to be forced into making a *kolossal* film?" He stressed the German word with a smile.

"I'm still afraid of it," I answered absent-mindedly, "partly because that's the way things are going at present in the Italian studios."

"Well, you're not to be afraid. We," he said, assuming all at once a hard, authoritative tone, "we are going to make a film that is psychological and only psychological . . . as indeed I said to you that day. I, my dear Molteni, am not accustomed to doing what the producers want, but what *I* want. On the set, it is *I* who am the master, and no one else. Otherwise I don't make the film. Quite simple, isn't it?"

I answered that it was, indeed, quite simple; and I spoke in a tone of sincere pleasure, because this assertion of autonomy made me hope that I would easily come to such terms with Rheingold as would result in the work being less tedious than usual. After a moment's silence, Rheingold resumed: "And now I should like to explain some of my ideas to you. I presume you can drive and listen at the same time?"

"Of course," I said; but at that same moment, as I turned very slightly towards him, a cart drawn by two oxen appeared out of a side road and I had to swerve suddenly. The car heeled over, zig-zagged violently, and I had considerable difficulty in righting it, just in time to avoid a tree, by a narrow margin. Rheingold started to laugh. "One would say *not,*" he remarked.

"Don't bother about that," I said, rather annoyed. "It was quite impossible for me to have seen those oxen. Go on: I'm listening."

Rheingold needed no persuading. "You see, Molteni," he went on, "I've agreed to go to Capri . . . and in fact we shall certainly shoot the exteriors of the film in the Bay of Naples. But that will be only the background; for the rest we might as well stay in Rome. The drama of Ulysses, in fact, is not the drama of a sailor, or an explorer, or a war veteran. It is the drama of Everyman. The myth of Ulysses conceals the true story of a certain type of man."

I remarked, at random: "All the Greek myths depict human dramas—dramas without time or place, eternal."

"Exactly. All the Greek myths, in other words, are figurative allegories of human life . . . Now, what ought we moderns to do in order to resuscitate such ancient and obscure myths? First of all, to discover the significance which they can have for us of the modern world, and then to fathom that significance as deeply as we can, to interpret it, to illustrate it . . . but in a live, independent way, without allowing ourselves to be crushed by the masterpieces that Greek literature has drawn from these myths. Let us take an example. No doubt you know O'Neill's *Mourning becomes Electra*, from which the film was also taken?"

"Yes, certainly I know it."

"Well, O'Neill too understood this very simple truth—that the ancient myths have to be interpreted in a modern manner, including the *Oresteia*. But I don't care for *Mourning becomes Electra*—do you know why? Because O'Neill allowed himself to be intimidated by Aeschylus. He thought, quite rightly, that the Orestes myth could be interpreted psychoanalytically; but, intimidated by the subject, he made too literal a transcription of the myth. Like a good schoolboy writing out an exercise in a book with ruled paper—you can see the lines, Molteni." I heard Rheingold laughing to himself, pleased with his own criticism of O'Neill.

We were driving across the Roman *campagna* now, not far from the sea, between low hills yellow with ripe corn, with an occasional leafy tree here and there. We must be far behind Battista, I thought; the road, as far as the eye could reach, was empty—empty in its long, straight tracts, empty at every bend. At that moment Battista would be driving, far ahead, at sixty miles an hour, perhaps more than thirty miles in front of us. I heard Rheingold's voice begin again: "If O'Neill understood this truth, that the Greek myths must be interpreted in a modern manner, according to the latest psychological discoveries, he ought not to have respected his subject too much, but should have torn it to pieces, turned it inside out, put new life into it. This he did not do, and his *Mourning becomes Electra* is tedious and cold . . it's a school exercise."

"I think it's rather fine," I objected.

Rheingold disregarded the interruption and went on: "We've now got to do with the *Odyssey* what O'Neill did not wish, or did not know how, to do with the *Oresteia* . . . that is, open it up, as a body is opened up on the dissecting table, examine its internal mechanism, take it to pieces and then put it together again according to our modern requirements."

I was wondering what Rheingold was driving at. I said, rather distractedly: "The mechanism of the *Odyssey* is well known: the contrast between the longing for home and family and fatherland, and the innumerable obstacles which stand in the way of a quick return to fatherland and home and family. Probably every prisoner of war, every war veteran who for some reason is detained far away from his own country after the end of a war, is, in his own way, a little Ulysses."

Rheingold gave a laugh which sounded like the clucking of a hen. "I was expecting that: the veteran, the prisoner. No, no, none of that, Molteni. You're going no farther than the externals, the facts. In that way the *Odyssey* film really does run the risk of being nothing more than a "kolossal" film, an adventure film, as Battista would like it to be. But Battista is the producer and it is right that he should think in that way. Not you, however, Molteni, you who are an intellectual. Molteni, you're intelligent and you must use your brain. Try to use it."

"I *am* using it," I said, rather irritated; "that's exactly what I am doing."

"No, you're not using it. Take a good look and think carefully and observe one fact before all others: the story of Ulysses is the story of Ulysses' relations with his wife."

I said nothing, this time. Rheingold continued: "What is the thing that strikes us most in the *Odyssey?* It is the slowness of Ulysses' return, the fact that he takes ten years to get home . . . and that, during those ten years, in spite of his much-proclaimed love for Penelope, he does, in reality, betray her every time he gets a chance . . . Homer tells us that Ulysses thought only of Penelope, that the one thing he desired was to be reunited with Penelope . . . but ought we to believe him, Molteni?"

"If we don't believe Homer," I said, more or less jokingly, "I really don't see who we are to believe."

"Why, ourselves, men of the modern world, who know how to see right through the myth. Molteni, after reading and re-reading the *Odyssey* several times, I've come to the conclusion that, really and truly—and of course without realizing it—Ulysses did not *want* to get home, did not *want* to be reunited to Penelope . . . that's my conclusion, Molteni."

I said nothing, and again Rheingold, emboldened by my silence, resumed. "Ulysses, in reality, is a man who is afraid of returning to his wife—and we shall see later why—and, with this fear in his heart, seeks, in his subconscious mind, to create obstacles in his own path . . . That famous spirit of adventure is really no more than an unconscious desire to slow down his journey, frittering away the time in adventures that delay him and take him out of his way . . . It is not Scylla and Charybdis, Calypso and the Phaeacians, Polyphemus, Circe and the gods who are opposed to the return of Ulysses; it is Ulysses' own subconscious which, step by step, creates good excuses for him to stay a year here, two years there, and so on."

So this was what Rheingold was driving at—this classic Freudian interpretation of the *Odyssey*. I was only surprised that I had not thought of it before: Rheingold was a German, he had started his career in Berlin, at the time of Freud's first successes, he had spent some time in the United States where psychoanalysis was held in great esteem; it was only natural that he should seek to apply its methods even to that hero who was, *par excellence*, devoid of complexes, Ulysses. I said drily: "Very ingenious. But I still don't see how . . ."

"One moment, Molteni, one moment. It is therefore clear, in the light of my interpretation—which is the only correct one in accordance with the latest discoveries of modern psychology—that the *Odyssey* is merely the inside story of what I may call a conjugal repugnance. This conjugal repugnance is debated and examined at great length by Ulysses, and it is only after ten years of struggle with himself that he finally succeeds in overcoming it and dominating it by accepting precisely the situation that had caused it. In other words, Ulysses, for ten years, invents for himself every possible kind of delay, makes every possible kind of excuse for not returning to the conjugal roof . . . he actually thinks, more than once, of binding himself to another woman. At last, however, he does succeed in gaining command over himself, and he goes home. And this return home of Ulysses amounts precisely to an acceptance of the situation owing to which he went away and did not want to come back."

"What situation?" I asked, genuinely stupid this time. "Didn't Ulysses go away simply in order to take part in the Trojan War?"

"Externals, externals," repeated Rheingold with impatience. "But as to the situation at Ithaca before Ulysses' departure to the war, the suitors and all the rest of it, I will speak about that when I explain the reasons for which Ulysses did not wish to return to Ithaca and was afraid to go back to his wife. In the meantime, however, I should like to stress first one important point: the *Odyssey* is not an extended adventure through geographical space, as Homer would have us believe. It is, on the contrary, the wholly interior drama of Ulysses . . . and everything that happens in it is a symbol of Ulysses' subconscious. Of course you know your Freud, Molteni?"

"Yes, a little."

"Well, Freud will serve us as a guide through this interior landscape of Ulysses, not Berard with his maps and his philology which explains nothing . . . and, instead of the Mediterranean, we shall explore the mind of Ulysses—or rather, his subconscious."

Vaguely irritated, I said, with perhaps excessive violence: "What's the point of going to Capri, then, for a boudoir drama? We might just as well work in a furnished room in a modern quarter of Rome."

As I spoke, I saw Rheingold throw me a glance of mingled surprise and resentment; he then laughed disagreeably, as though he preferred to make a joke of a discussion that threatened to end badly. "We'd better resume this conversation, calmly, at Capri," he said, and then went on: "You can't drive and discuss the *Odyssey* with me both at the same time, Molteni. Now you had better devote yourself to driving, and I, for my part, will admire this extremely beautiful landscape."

I did not dare contradict him; and for almost an hour we went on in silence. We passed through the region of the ancient Pontine Marshes, with the thick, sluggish water of the canal on our right and the green expanse of the reclaimed plain on our left; we passed through Cisterna; we came to Terracina. After this latter town, the road started to run close beside the sea, being sheltered on its other side by rocky, sun-scorched mountains of moderate height. The sea was not calm; it could be seen beyond the yellow and black dunes, and was of an opaque green, a color that one guessed to be produced by the large quantity of sand stirred up from the bottom by a recent storm. Massive waves rose languidly, and their white water, like soapsuds, invaded the brief stretch of beach. Farther off, the sea was in movement but there were no waves, and the green color changed into an almost violet blue, over which, driven by the wind, appearing and disappearing, white curls of foam ran swiftly. The same capricious, lively disorder reigned in the sky: there were white clouds travelling in all directions; vast blue spaces swept by radiant, blinding light; sea-birds turning and swooping and hovering, as though taking care to follow, with their flight, the gusts and eddies of the wind. I drove with my eyes upon this seascape; and, all of a sudden, as if in reaction against the remorse aroused in me by Rheingold's surprised, offended look when I described his interpretation of the *Odyssey* as a "boudoir drama," there flashed into my mind the thought that, after all, I had not been wrong: upon that bright-colored sea, beneath that luminous sky, along that deserted shore, it would not have been difficult to imagine the black ships of Ulysses outlined between one wave and another, sailing towards the then virgin and unknown lands of the Mediterranean. And Homer had wished to represent a sea just like this, beneath a similar sky, along a similar coast, with characters that resembled this landscape and had about them its ancient simplicity, its agreeable moderation. Everything was here, and there was nothing else. And now Rheingold was wanting to make this bright and luminous world, enlivened by the winds, glowing with sunshine, populated by quick-witted, lively beings, into a kind of dark, visceral recess, bereft of color and form, sunless, airless: the subconscious mind of Ulysses. And so the *Odyssey* was no longer that marvellous adventure, the discovery of the Mediterranean, in humanity's fantastic infancy, but had become the interior drama of a modern man entangled in the contradictions of a psychosis. I said to myself, as a kind of conclusion to these reflections, that, in a sense, I could hardly have happened upon a more unfortunate script: to the usual tendency of the cinema to change everything for the worse which had no need to be changed at all, there was added, in this case, the particular gloom, entirely mechanical and abstract in quality, of psychoanalysis—applied, into the bargain, to a work of art as untrammelled and concrete as the *Odyssey*. We were passing along, at that moment, very close to the sea: beside the road were the green sprays of an exuberant vineyard planted almost in the sand, and beyond it a brief tract of shore, black with debris, upon which the big waves broke heavily from time to time. I pulled up suddenly and said drily: "I simply must stretch my legs."

We got out of the car, and I immediately started off down a path that led through the vineyard to the beach. I explained to Rheingold: "I've been shut up indoors for eight months . . . I haven't seen the sea since last summer. Let's go down to the beach for a moment."

He followed me in silence; perhaps he was still offended, and still cross with me. The path wound through the vineyard for not much more than fifty yards and then petered out in the sand of the beach. The dull, mechanical sound of the engine had now been replaced by the irregular, echoing roar—to me a delicious sound—of waves piled upon each other and breaking in disorder. I walked a short distance, now going down on to the shimmering wet sand and now withdrawing again, according as the waves advanced or retired; finally I stopped and stood still for a long time on top of a sand-dune, my eyes turned towards the horizon. I felt I had offended Rheingold, that I ought to resume the conversation again in some more courteous manner, and that he was expecting me to do so. So, although it irritated me very much to be forced to interrupt my rapt contemplation of the far-off spaces of the sea, I finally made up my mind. "I'm sorry, Rheingold," I said all at once, "perhaps I didn't express myself very well just now. But, to tell you the truth, your interpretation didn't entirely convince me . . . if you like, I'll tell you why."

He answered at once, solicitously: "Tell me . . . tell me . . . discussion is part of our work, isn't it?"

"Well," I resumed, without looking at him, "I am not entirely convinced, though I'm not saying that the *Odyssey* may not have that significance too. But the distinctive quality of the Homeric poems and, in general, of classical art is to conceal such a significance and a thousand other meanings too, that may occur to us moderns, in a conclusive, and what I may call a profound, form. What I mean is," I added, with sudden, inexplicable irritation, "the beauty of the *Odyssey* consists precisely in this belief in reality as it is and as it presents itself objectively . . . in this same form, in fact, which allows of no analysis or dissection and which is exactly what it is: take it or leave it. In other words," I concluded, still looking not at Rheingold but at the sea, "the world of Homer is a real world. Homer belonged to a civilization which had developed in accordance with, not in antagonism to, nature . . . That is why Homer believed in the reality of the perceptible world and saw it in a direct way, as he represented it, and that is why we too should accept it as it is, believing in it as Homer believed in it, literally, without going out of our way to look for hidden meanings."

I paused, but my attempt at clarification, far from calming me, had strangely exasperated me, as though it had been an effort that I knew perfectly well to be useless. And almost immediately came Rheingold's reply, accompanied by a burst of laughter, this time triumphant: "Extrovert, extrovert . . . You, Molteni, like all Mediterranean people, are an extrovert, and you don't understand anyone who is an introvert. But of course there's no harm in that. I am an introvert and you are an extrovert . . . it was precisely for that that I chose you. You, with your extrovert character, will counterbalance my introvert character. Our collaboration will work marvellously well, as you'll see."

I was on the point of answering him; and I think my answer would have been such as to offend him again, for I again felt violently irritated at his pig-headed obtuseness; when a well-known voice suddenly reached me from behind: "Rheingold, Molteni . . . what are you doing here? Taking the sea air?"

I turned and saw, clear-cut in the strong morning light, the two figures of Battista and Emilia, at the point where the dunes were highest. Battista was coming quickly down towards us, waving his hand in greeting, and Emilia was following more slowly, looking down at the ground. Battista's whole bearing showed a cheerfulness and an assurance even greater than usual; while that of Emilia seemed to me to exude discontent, perplexity and an indefinable disgust.

Rather surprised, I said at once to Battista: "We thought you were far ahead . . . at Formia, at least, or even farther."

Battista answered, in a self-possessed voice: "We went a long way around . . . I wanted to show your wife a property of mine near Rome where I'm building a villa . . . then we found a couple of grade crossings closed." He turned towards Rheingold and asked: "Everything all right, Rheingold? Been talking about the *Odyssey?*"

"Everything all right," replied Rheingold in the same telegraphic style, from beneath the peak of his cloth cap. Obviously Battista's arrival annoyed him, and he would have preferred to continue the discussion with me.

"Splendid, that's wonderful"; and Battista took us both confidentially by the arm and moved away, drawing us towards Emilia who had stopped at a little distance along the beach. "And now," he went on, with a gallantry that seemed to me insufferable, "now, fair Signora, it's up to you to decide. Shall we lunch at Naples, or shall we lunch at Formia? You must choose."

Emilia gave a start and said: "You three must choose . . . it's all the same to me."

"No, no, goodness gracious, it's the ladies who have to decide."

"Well then, let's lunch at Naples; I'm not hungry now."

"All right, Naples let it be. Fish soup with *sughillo*. A band playing *O sole mio* . . ." There could be no doubt of Battista's cheerfulness.

"What time does the steamer leave for Capri?" asked Rheingold.

"At half past two. We'd better get on," replied Battista. He left us and went off towards the road.

Rheingold followed and, catching him up, walked beside him. Emilia, on the other hand, remained where she was for a moment, pretending to look at the sea, as though to allow them to go on ahead of us. But, as soon as I came up to her, she took me by the arm and said in a low voice: "I'm coming in your car now . . . and please don't contradict me."

I was struck by her tone of urgency. "Why, what's happened?"

"Nothing . . . only that Battista drives too fast."

We walked up the path in silence. When we reached the road, near the two stationary cars, Emilia moved in a determined manner towards mine.

"Hi," cried Battista, "isn't the Signora coming with me?"

I turned: Battista was standing beside the open door of his car, in the sun-filled road. Rheingold remained in uncertainty between the two cars, looking at us. Emilia, without raising her voice, said quietly: "I'm going with my husband now. We'll all meet at Naples."

I expected Battista to give in without any more ado. But, to my slight surprise, he came running over to us. "Signora, you're going to be with your husband for two months, at Capri . . . and I," he added in a low voice, so as not to be overheard by the director, "I've had just a bit too much of Rheingold in Rome, and I assure you he's not amusing. Surely your husband doesn't mind you coming with me, do you, Molteni?"

I could not but answer, although it was an effort to me: "No, not at all. But Emilia says you drive too fast."

"I'll go at a snail's space," promised Battista, facetiously but with warmth. "But I do beg of you not to leave me alone with Rheingold." He lowered his voice again. "If you knew what a bore he is. He talks of nothing but films."

I don't know what came over me at that moment. Perhaps I thought it was not worth while annoying Battista for so frivolous a reason. Without giving myself time to reflect, I said: "Come on Emilia . . . won't you do this to please Battista? . . . He's quite right, anyhow," I added with a smile, "there's nothing you can talk about to Rheingold except films."

"Exactly," confirmed Battista, satisfied. Then he took Emilia by the arm—very high up, right under the armpit—saying: "Come along, fair Signora, don't be unkind . . . I promise you I'll go at walking pace."

Emilia threw me a glance which, at the time, I was quite unable to account for; then she answered slowly: "Very well, if you say so." She turned with sudden decision, and adding "Let's go, then" walked off with Battista, who still kept a tight grip on her arm, as if he feared she might escape. I was left standing in uncertainty beside my own car, gazing at Emilia and Battista as they moved away. Beside Battista, thickset and shorter than herself, she walked indolently, slowly, with an air of discontent that was yet full of an intense, mysterious sensuality. She seemed to me, at that moment, extremely beautiful; not the middle-class "fair signora" to whom Battista alluded, in that greedy, metallic voice of his; but truly very beautiful like some creature outside time or place, in harmony with the sparkling sea and the luminous sky against which her figure was outlined. And her beauty had about it a look of subjection, of reluctance, the cause of which I was at a loss to identify. Then, as I looked at her, I was struck by this thought: "Idiot . . . perhaps she wanted to be left alone with you . . . perhaps she wanted to talk to you, to explain things once and for all, to confide in you . . . perhaps she wanted to tell you that she loves you. And you forced her to go off with Battista." This idea brought me a feeling of sharp regret, and I lifted my arm as though to call her. But by now it was too late: she was getting into Battista's car and Battista was getting in beside her and Rheingold was walking towards me. So I got into my car, and Rheingold took the seat beside me. At that same moment Battista's car went past us, grew rapidly smaller in the distance, and disappeared.

Perhaps Rheingold had become aware of the violent ill-humor that overcame me at that moment; for instead of resuming—at I feared he would—our conversation about the *Odyssey,* he pulled his cap down over his eyes, settled down into his seat and was very soon asleep. I drove on in silence, therefore, urging my far from powerful little car to its greatest possible speed; and all the time, in an uncontrollable, frantic manner, my ill-humor increased. The road had turned away from the sea, and was now crossing a prosperous countryside, golden in the sunshine. At any other time I should have rejoiced in these luxuriant trees which, here and there, met over my head, forming a living gallery of rustling leafy branches; in these grey olives scattered, as far as the eye could reach, over the red hillsides; in these orange groves laden with glossy, dark foliage in the midst of which shone the round, golden fruit; in these old, blackened farm buildings guarded by two or three tawny haystacks. But I saw nothing; I drove on and on, and as time passed my wretched ill-humor increased more and more. I did not try to discover the reason for it, which undoubtedly went far beyond simple regret at not having insisted upon taking Emilia with me; even if I had wished to do so, my mind was so obscured by anger that I should have been incapable of it. But, like some kind of uncontrollable nervous convulsion which lasts as long as it is due to last and then by successive phases, gradually dies down and ceases, leaving its victim all aching and dizzy, so my ill-humor gradually reached its highest point as we passed through fields and woods, plains and mountains, then decreased, and finally, as we came near Naples, vanished altogether. Now we were going swiftly down the hill towards the sea, in sight of the blue waters of the bay, amongst pines and magnolias; and I was feeling dull and torpid—like, an epileptic who has been shaken, body and soul, by a convulsion of irresistible violence.

13

Battista's villa, as we learned on our arrival in Capri, was a long way from the main *piazza*, at a lonely point on the coast in the direction of the Sorrento peninsula. After we had accompanied Rheingold to his hotel, Battista, Emilia and I went off towards the villa along a narrow lane.

At first our road took us along the sheltered walk that runs around the island, halfway up the mountain-side. It was almost sunset, and only a few people passed, slowly and in silence, along the brick paved walk in the shadow of the flowering oleanders or between the walls of the luxuriant gardens. Now and again, through the foliage of pines and carobtrees, one caught a glimpse of the distant sea, a sea of a hard and peerless blue, shot with the glittering, cold rays of the declining sun. I was walking behind Battista and Emilia, stopping from time to time to observe the beauties of the place, and, almost to my surprise, for the first time after a long period, I felt, if not exactly joyful, at least calm and composed. We traversed the whole length of the walk; then we turned off along another, narrower path. Suddenly, at a bend, the Faraglioni became visible, and I was pleased to hear Emilia utter a cry of astonishment and admiration; it was the first time she had been to Capri and so far she had not opened her mouth. From that height the two great, red rocks were surprising in their strangeness, lying on the surface of the sea like two meteorites fallen from heaven on to a mirror. Elated at the sight, I told Emilia that there was a race of lizards on the Faraglioni that existed nowhere else in the world—bright blue because they lived between the blue sky and the blue sea. She listened to my explanation with curiosity, as though for a moment she had forgotten her hostility towards me; so that I could not but conceive a fresh hope of reconciliation, and in my mind the blue lizard, which I described nestling in the cavities of the two rocks, suddenly became the symbol of what we ourselves might become, if we stayed a long time on the island. We too should be of a pure blue within our hearts, from which the clear calm of our sojourn by the sea would gradually wash away the sooty blackness of gloomy town thoughts—blue and with a blue light within us, like the lizards, like the sea, like the sky, like everything that is bright and gay and pure.

After we had passed the Faraglioni, the path started to wind amongst rocky precipices, and there were no more villas or gardens. At last, on a lonely point, there appeared a long, low, white building with a big terrace jutting out above the sea; this was Battista's villa.

It was not a large villa: apart from a living-room that opened on to the terrace, there were only three other rooms. Battista, who walked in front of us as though to display his pride of ownership, explained that he had never lived in it, and that it was scarcely a year since he had come into possession of it as part payment of a debt. He drew our attention to the way in which he had had all preparations made for our arrival: there were vases of flowers in the living-room; the glossy floor emitted a pungent smell of wax polish; when we looked into the kitchen, we saw the caretaker's wife busy in front of the cooking-stove, preparing our dinner. Battista, who made a special point of displaying all the conveniences of the villa to us, insisted on our examining every nook and corner of it; he carried his politeness even to the extent of opening the cupboards and asking Emilia if there were enough coat-hangers. Then we went back into the living-room. Emilia said she was going to change her clothes, and went out. I should have liked to follow her example; but Battista sat down in an armchair and invited me to do the same, thus preventing me. He lit a cigarette and then, without any preamble, asked, in a wholly unexpected manner: "Well, Molteni, what d'you think of Rheingold?"

I answered, in some astonishment: "Really I don't know. I've seen too little of him to be able to judge. He seems to me a very serious sort of person. He's said to be an extremely good director."

Battista reflected for a moment and then went on: "You see, Molteni, I don't know him at all well either, but I know, more or less, what he thinks and what he wants . . . In the first place, he's a German, isn't he?—whereas you and I are Italians. Two worlds, two conceptions of life, two different sensibilities."

I said nothing. As usual Battista was taking a roundabout course and keeping away from all material concerns: so I waited to see what he was getting at. "You see, Molteni," he resumed, "I wanted to put you, an Italian, to work beside Rheingold, just because I feel him to be so different from us. I trust you, Molteni, and before I go away—and I ought to leave here as soon as possible—I want to give you a few words of advice."

"Go on," I remarked coldly.

"I've been watching Rheingold," said Battista, "during our discussions about the film; either he agrees with me or he says nothing . . . but I know too much about people, by this time, to believe in that kind of attitude. You intellectuals, Molteni, all of you, all of you without exception, you think, more or less, that producers are simply business men, and that's all there is to it. Don't deny it, Molteni; that's what you think, and of course Rheingold thinks just the same. Now, up to a point, it's true. Rheingold perhaps thinks that he can fool me by this passive attitude of his, but I'm wide awake, very wide awake, Molteni!"

"The fact of the matter is," I said abruptly, "you don't trust Rheingold?"

"I trust him and I don't trust him. I trust him as a technician, as a professional. I don't trust him as a German, as a man of another world, different from our world. Now—" and Battista put down his cigarette in the ashtray and looked me straight in the eyes—"now, Molteni, let it be quite clear that what I want is a film as much like Homer's *Odyssey* as possible. And what was Homer's intention, with the *Odyssey*? He intended to tell an adventure story which would keep the reader in suspense the whole time . . . a story which would be, so to speak, spectacular. That's what Homer wanted to do. And I want you two to stick faithfully to Homer. Homer put giants, prodigies, storms, witches, monsters into the *Odyssey*—and I want you to put giants, prodigies, storms, witches and monsters into the film . . ."

"But of course we shall put them in!" I said, somewhat surprised.

"Yes, you'll put them in, you'll put them in . . ." cried Battista in sudden, unexpected anger; "perhaps you think I'm a fool, Molteni? I'm not a fool." He had raised his voice and was staring at me with a furious look in his eyes. I was astonished at this sudden rage; and, even more, by the vitality of Battista who, after driving a car all day long and crossing from Naples to Capri, instead of resting when he arrived, as I should have done in his place, still had a desire to discuss Rheingold's intentions. I said, softly: "But what makes you imagine that I think you're a . . . a fool?"

"Your attitude, the attitude of both of you, Molteni."

"Please explain."

Slightly calmer now, Battista took up his cigarette again and went on: "You remember—that day when you met Rheingold for the first time in my office—you said then that you didn't feel you were cut out for a spectacular film, didn't you?"

"Yes, I think I did."

"And what did Rheingold say to you, to reassure you?"

"I don't quite remember . . ."

"I will refresh your memory. Rheingold told you not to worry . . . he intended to make a psychological film—a film about the conjugal relations of Ulysses and Penelope. Isn't that so?"

Again I was astonished: Battista, under that coarse, animal-like mask, was sharper than I had believed. "Yes," I admitted, "I think he did say something of the kind."

"Now, seeing that the script hasn't yet been started and that nothing has yet been done, it is just as well that I should inform you with the utmost seriousness that, for me, the *Odyssey* is not a matter of the conjugal relations of Ulysses and Penelope."

I said nothing, and Battista, after a pause, went on: "If I wanted to make a film about relations between husband and wife, I should take a modern novel, I should stay in Rome, and I should shoot the film in the bedrooms and drawing-rooms of the Parioli quarter . . . I shouldn't bother about Homer and the *Odyssey*. Do you see, Molteni?"

"Yes, yes, I see."

"Relations between husbands and wives don't interest me —do you see, Molteni? The *Odyssey* is the story of the adventures of Ulysses on his journey back to Ithaca, and what I want is a film of the adventures of Ulysses . . . and in order that there should be no more doubts on the matter, I want a spectacular film, Molteni—spec-tac-ular—do you see, Molteni?"

"You need have no doubts about it," I said, rather irritated, "you shall have a spectacular film."

Battista threw away his cigarette and, in his normal voice, endorsed what I had said. "I don't doubt it," he said, "seeing that, after all, it's I who pay for it. You must understand that I have said all this to you, Molteni, so as to avoid unpleasant misunderstandings. You begin work tomorrow morning, and I wanted to warn you in time, in your own interest too. I trust you, Molteni, and I want you to be my mouthpiece, so to speak, with Rheingold. You must remind Rheingold, whenever it may become necessary, that the *Odyssey* gave pleasure, and has always given pleasure, because it is a work of poetry . . . and I want that poetry to get over, complete, into the film, exactly as it is!"

I realized that Battista was now really calm again: he was, in fact, no longer talking about the spectacular film that he insisted upon our producing, but rather poetry. After a brief incursion into the earthy depths of box office success, we had now returned to the airy regions of art and the spirit. With a painful grimace which was meant to be a smile, I said: "Have no doubts about it, Battista. You shall have all Homer's poetry . . . or anyhow all the poetry we're capable of finding in him."

"Splendid, splendid, let's not talk of it any more." Battista rose from his armchair, stretching himself, looked at his wrist-watch, said abruptly that he was going to wash before dinner, and went out. I was left alone.

I also had previously thought of retiring to my room and getting ready for dinner. But the discussion with Battista had distracted and excited me, and I started walking up and down the room, almost without knowing what I was doing. The truth was that the things Battista had said to me had, for the first time, given me a glimpse of the difficulty of a task which I had undertaken rather light-heartedly and thinking only of material advantage: and now I felt that I was succumbing in advance to the fatigue from which I should be suffering by the time the script was finished. "Why all this?" I said to myself; "why should I subject myself to this disagreeable effort, to the discussions that will doubtless take place between ourselves and Battista, to say nothing of those that will crop up between me and Rheingold, to the compromises that are bound to follow, to the bitterness of putting my name to a production that is false and commercial? Why all this?" My visit to Capri, which had seemed to me so attractive when I looked down upon the Faraglioni from the high path a short time before, now appeared as it were discolored by the dreariness of a thankless and questionable undertaking—that of reconciling the demands of an honest man of letters such as myself with the wholly different demands of a producer. I was once again conscious, in a painful manner, that Battista was the master and I the servant, and that a servant must do anything rather than disobey his master; that any methods of cunning or flattery by which he may seek to evade his master's authority are in themselves more humiliating than complete obedience; that, in brief, by appending my signature to the contract, I had sold my soul to a devil who, like all devils, was at the same time both exacting and mean. Battista had said quite clearly, in a burst of sincerity: "It's I who pay!" I, certainly, had no need of all that amount of sincerity to say to myself: "And it's I who am paid!" This phrase sounded continually in my ears, every time I turned my mind to the film-script. Suddenly these thoughts gave me a feeling of suffocation. I felt a strong desire to escape from the very air that Battista breathed. I went over to the french window, opened it and stepped out on to the terrace.

14

NIGHT HAD FALLEN, by now; and the terrace was gently illuminated by the indirect, but already intense, brilliance which a still invisible moon spread across the sky. A flight of steps led from the terrace to the path that ran round the island. I hesitated a moment, wondering whether to descend these steps and go for a walk, but it was late and the path was too dark. I decided to stay on the terrace. I stood looking over the balustrade and lit a cigarette.

Above me, black and sharp against the clear, starry sky, rose the rocks of the island. Other rocks could be dimly discerned on the precipice below. The silence was profound: if I listened, I could just hear the brief rustling sound of a wave breaking, from time to time, on the pebbly beach in the inlet far below, and then retreating again. Or perhaps I was wrong, and there was no rustling sound but only the breathing of the calm sea swelling and spreading with the movement of the tide. The air was still and windless; raising my eyes toward the horizon I could see, in the distance, the little white light of the Punta Camapanella lighthouse on the mainland, ceaselessly turning, now flashing, now extinguished again, and this light, scarcely perceptible and lost in the vastness of the night, was the only sign of life I could see all around me.

I felt myself growing quickly calmer under the influence of this calm night; and yet I was aware, with complete lucidity, that all the beauty in the world could produce only a fleeting interruption in the sequence of my troubles. And indeed, after I had stood for some time motionless and thinking of nothing, staring in the darkness, my mind, almost against my will, came back to the thought that dominated it, the thought of Emilia; but this time, perhaps as a result of my conversations with Battista and Rheingold and of the place I was in, so similar to places described in Homer's poem, it was strangely mingled and bound up with the thought of the *Odyssey* script. Suddenly, from some unknown spring of memory, there rose into my mind a passage from the last canto of the *Odyssey*, in which Ulysses, in order to prove his true identity, gives a minute description of his marriage bed; and so, at last, Penelope recognizes her husband and turns pale and almost faints, and then, weeping, throws her arms around his neck and speaks words which I had learned by heart from having so very often re-read and repeated them to myself: "Ah, Ulysses, be not angry, thou who in every event didst always show thyself the wisest of men. The gods condemned us to misfortune, being unwilling that we should enjoy the green and flourishing years side by side, and then see, each of us, the other's hair grow white." Alas, I did not know Greek; but I was aware that the translation could not be a truly faithful one, if only because it failed to reproduce the beautiful naturalness of the Homeric original. Nevertheless I had always taken a singular pleasure in these lines, because of the feeling that shone through them, even in so formal an expression; and, as I read them, it had so happened that I had compared them with Petrarch's lines in the sonnet that begins:

Tranquillo porto avea mostrato amore

and ends with the triplet:

Et ella avrebbe a me forse risposto
Qualche santa parola, sospirando,
Cangiati i volti e l'una e l'altra chioma.

What had struck me, both in Homer and in Petrarch, was the feeling of a constant, unshakable love, which nothing could undermine and nothing could cool, even in old age. Why did those lines come back now into my mind? I saw that the recollection arose from my relations with Emilia, so different from those of Ulysses with Penelope or of Petrarch with Laura, relations which were in peril not after thirty or forty years of marriage but after a few months, relations to which the comforting expectation of ending our lives together was certainly denied, or of remaining lovers always, as on the very first day, notwithstanding that "our faces were changed and the hair of both of us." And I—I who had so ardently wished that our relations might be such as to justify the hope of this expectation—was left with a feeling of astonishment and terror in face of the rupture—to me incomprehensible—that was preventing my dream from coming true. Why? Almost as though I were seeking a reply from the villa which in one of its rooms enclosed the person of Emilia, I swung around towards the window, turning my back on the sea.

I happened to be standing at one corner of the terrace, in such a way that I could see, albeit slantwise, right into the living-room, without myself being seen. As I looked up, I saw that Battista and Emilia were both in the room. Emilia, who was wearing the same low-necked, black evening dress that she had worn on the occasion of our first meeting with Battista was standing close beside a little movable bar; and Battista, bending over the bar, was preparing some drink in a large crystal glass. I was suddenly struck by something unnatural in Emilia's demeanor—a look of mingled perplexity and impudence, something between embarrassment and temptation: she stood waiting for Battista to hand her the glass and in the meantime was looking around her with an uneasy expression in which I recognized that look of disintegration that was caused in her, by doubt and bewilderment. Then Battista finished mixing the drinks, carefully filled two glasses, and held one out to Emilia as he rose; she started, as though awakening from a fit of deep abstraction, and slowly put out her hand to take the glass. My eyes were upon her at that moment as, standing in front of Battista, leaning slightly backwards, she raised one hand with the glass in it and supported herself with the other on the back of an armchair; and I could not help noticing that she seemed, as it were, to be offering her whole body as she thrust forward her bosom and her belly beneath the tight, glossy material of her dress. This gesture of offering herself, however, did not betray itself in any way in her face, which preserved its usual expression of uncertainty. Finally, as though to break an embarrassing silence, she said something, turning her head towards a group of armchairs at the far end of the room, round the fireplace; and then, cautiously, so as not to spill her brimming glass, she walked towards them. And then the thing happened which by now, in reality, I was expecting; Battista caught up with her in the middle of the room and put his arm around her waist, bringing his face close to hers, over her shoulder. She immediately protested, with no severity in her manner, but with a vivacity that was imploring and perhaps even playful, as, with her eyes, she indicated the glass which she was now holding tightly between her fingers, in mid-air. Battista laughed, shook his head and drew her more closely towards him, with a movement so abrupt that, as she had feared, the glass was upset. "Now he's going to kiss her on the mouth," I thought; but I failed to take into account Battista's character, Battista's brutality. He did not in fact kiss her, but, grasping the edge of her dress on her shoulder in his fist, with a strange, cruel violence, twisted and pulled it roughly downwards. One of Emilia's shoulders was now completely bare, and Battista's head was bending over it so that he might press his mouth against it; and she was standing upright and still, as though waiting patiently for him to have finished; but I had time to see that her face and her eyes, even during the kiss, remained perplexed and uneasy, as before. Then she looked in the direction of the window, and it seemed to me that our eyes met; I saw her make a gesture of disdain and then, holding up the torn shoulder-strap with one hand, leave the room hurriedly. I turned and walked back along the terrace.

My chief sensation at the moment was one of confusion and astonishment, because it seemed to me that what I had seen was in complete contradiction with what I knew and had hitherto thought. Emilia, who no longer loved me and who, in her own words, despised me, was in reality, then, deceiving me with Battista. And so the situation between us was now reversed: from being vaguely in the wrong I had become clearly in the right; after seeing myself despised for no reason, it was I, now, who had full justification for despising; and the whole mystery of Emilia's conduct towards me resolved itself into a perfectly ordinary intrigue. It may be that this first harsh yet logical reflection, dictated largely by my own personal pride, prevented me, at that moment, from being conscious of any pain caused by the discovery of Emilia's unfaithfulness (or what appeared to me to be unfaithfulness). But as I approached the balustrade at the edge of the terrace, feeling irresolute and half-stunned, I became suddenly aware of the pain, and, recoiling to the opposite extreme, was certain that what I had seen was not, could not be, the truth. Certainly, I said to myself, Emilia had let herself be kissed by Battista; but, in some mysterious way, my own guilt did not on that account disappear, nor, as I realized, did I now have the right to despise her in my turn; in fact—why, I did not know—it seemed to me that she still retained this right towards me in spite of the kiss I had seen. And so, really and truly, I was making a mistake: she was not being unfaithful to me; or, at most, her unfaithfulness was merely apparent; and the essential truth of this unfaithfulness still had to be discovered, lying, as it did, right outside mere appearances.

I remembered that she had always shown a determined and, to me, inexplicable, aversion for Battista; and that, no longer ago than that very day, that very morning, she had twice besought me not to leave her alone, during the journey, with the producer. How could I reconcile this behavior on her part with the recent kiss? There could be no doubt that this kiss had been the first: Battista, in all probability, had managed to take advantage of a favorable moment which, before this evening, had never occurred. Nothing, therefore, was yet lost; I might still come to know why in the world it was that Emilia had let herself be kissed by Battista; and why, above all, I felt, in an obscure but unmistakable way, that in spite of the kiss our relations were not changed, but that—as before and no less than before—she still had the right to refuse me her love and to despise me.

It may be thought that this was not the moment for such reflections, and that my first and solitary impulse should have been to burst into the sitting-room and reveal my presence to the two lovers. But I had been pondering too long over Emilia's demeanor towards me to give way to a candid, unprepared outburst of that kind; and furthermore, what mattered most to me was not so much to put Emilia in the wrong as to shed new light upon our relationship. By bursting into the room, I should have precluded, once and for all, every possibility either of getting to know the truth or of winning back Emilia. Instead, I told myself, I must act with all possible reasonableness, with all the prudence and circumspection imposed upon me by circumstances which were at the same time both delicate and ambiguous.

There was another consideration which kept me from crossing the threshold of the living-room, this one, perhaps, of a more selfish kind: I saw that I now had a good reason for throwing over the *Odyssey* script, for ridding myself of a task that disgusted me and returning to my beloved theater. This consideration had the quality of being good for all three of us—for Emilia, for Battista, and for myself. The kiss I had witnessed marked, in reality, the culminating point of the falsity against which my whole life was contending, both in my relations with Emilia and in my work. At last I saw the possibility of clearing away this falsity, once and for all.

All this passed through my mind with the swiftness with which, if a window is suddenly thrown open, a blast of wind rushes into the room, bearing with it leaves and dust and all kinds of rubbish. And just as, if the window is closed again, there is a sudden silence and stillness within the room, so my mind, in the end, became all at once empty and silent, and I found myself standing there in astonishment, staring into the darkness, with no more thought or feeling in me. In this stupefied condition, and almost without knowing what I was doing, I left the balustrade and went over to the french window; I opened it and went into the living-room. How long had I remained on the terrace after coming unawares upon Battista embracing Emilia? Longer than I had thought, certainly, for I found Battista and Emilia already seated at table, halfway through dinner. I noticed that Emilia had taken off the dress which Battista had torn and had again put on the one she had worn for the journey; and this detail, for some reason, troubled me deeply, as a particularly cruel and eloquent proof of her infidelity. “We thought you must have gone for a nocturnal swim,” said Battista jovially. “Where the devil have you been hiding yourself?”

“I was just outside there,” I answered in a low voice. I saw Emilia raise her eyes in my direction, look at me for a moment, and then lower them again; and I was quite sure she had seen me watching their embrace from the terrace, and that she knew that I knew she had seen me.

15

EMILIA WAS SILENT DURING DINNER, but without any visible embarrassment, which surprised me because I thought she ought to be troubled and I had always, hitherto, considered her incapable of dissimulation. Battista, on the other hand, did not conceal his jubilant, victorious state of mind and never stopped talking, uninterruptedly, while at the same time eating with a good appetite and drinking with a freedom that was perhaps excessive. What did Battista talk about, that evening? Many things, but, I noticed, mainly about himself, whether directly or indirectly. The word "I" boomed aggressively from his mouth, with a frequency that irritated me; and I was no less disgusted by the way in which he contrived to make use of even the most far-fetched pretexts to descend by degrees to his own self. I realized, however, that this self-applause was due not so much to simple vanity as to a wholly masculine wish to glorify himself before Emilia, and possibly to humiliate me: he was convinced that he had made a conquest of Emilia, and now, very naturally, was taking pleasure in strutting like a peacock and showing off his most brilliant plumes in front of his victim. I am bound to admit, at this point, that Battista was no fool; and that, even during this display of masculine vanity, he still kept his feet on the ground and said things that were, for the most part, interesting; as when, at the end of dinner, he told us, in a lively manner but also with seriousness of judgment, of his recent trip to America and of a visit he had paid to the studios of Hollywood. But this did not prevent his arrogant, self-centered, indiscreet tone from becoming intolerable to me; and I imagined, somewhat ingenuously, that the same must be true of Emilia, whom I still, for some reason, held to be hostile to him, in spite of what I had seen and knew. But once again I was wrong: Emilia was not hostile to Battista—on the contrary; more than once while he was speaking I seemed to catch in her eyes a look which, if it was not exactly love-sick, at least showed a serious interest and was even, at moments, full of a wondering esteem. This look was as disconcerting and bitter to me as Battista's male vanity—if not more so; and it recalled to my memory another, similar look; but where I had noticed it, I could not at first remember. Then, suddenly, at the end of dinner, it came back to me: it was the same look—or anyhow, not far different—as the one I had caught, not very long ago, in the eyes of the wife of the film-director Pasetti, when I had had lunch with them at their home. Pasetti—pallid, insignificant, precise—was talking; and his wife gazed at him with spellbound eyes in which could be read, simultaneously, love, awe, admiration and self-surrender. Certainly Emilia had not yet reached that point with Battista, but it seemed to me that her look already held the germ of the feelings that Signora Pasetti cherished for her husband. Battista, in fact, did quite right to show off; Emilia, inexplicably, was already partly subjugated, and would soon be wholly so. At this thought I felt myself transfixed by a feeling of pain even sharper, perhaps than the pain I had felt shortly before, when I had seen them kissing. And I could not prevent the expression on my face from becoming visibly more gloomy. Battista must have noticed this change, for he threw me a penetrating glance and then suddenly asked: "What's the matter, Molteni? Aren't you pleased to be at Capri? Is there something wrong?"

"Why?"

"Because," he said, pouring himself out some wine, "you look gloomy . . . not to say ill-humored."

This was his method of attack: perhaps because he knew that the best way to be on the defensive is to be offensive. I answered with a promptness that surprised me: "I started feeling ill-humored while I was out on the terrace looking at the sea."

He raised his eyebrows and looked at me questioningly but with no sign of agitation. "Oh, really . . . why?"

I looked at Emilia: she did not appear to be worried, either. They were both of them incredibly sure of themselves. Yet Emilia had certainly seen me, and in all probability had told Battista. Suddenly these unpremeditated words issued from my mouth: "Battista, may I talk to you frankly?"

Again I wondered at his imperturbability. "Frankly?" he asked. "But of course! I always like people to talk to me frankly."

"You see," I went on, "when I was looking at the sea, I imagined for a moment that I was here working on my own account. My ambition, as you know, is to write for the theater. And so I thought how this would be the ideal spot, as they say, to devote myself to my work: beauty, silence, peace, my wife with me, nothing to worry about. Then I remembered that I was here, in this place which is so lovely and so favorable in every way, not for *that* purpose, but—I'm sorry, but you wanted me to be frank—in order to spend my time writing a film-script which will certainly be good but which, in fact, really and truly doesn't concern me. I shall give of my very best to Rheingold, and Rheingold will make whatever use of it he likes, and in the end I shall be given a check. And I shall have wasted three or four months of the best and most creative time of my life. I know I shouldn't say such things to you, nor to any other producer . . . but you wanted me to be frank. Now you know why I'm in a bad temper."

Why had I said these things instead of the others that were on the tip of my tongue and that concerned the conduct of Battista towards my wife? I did not know; perhaps owing to a sudden weariness of overstrained nerves; perhaps because in this way I expressed, indirectly, my desperation at Emilia's unfaithfulness which I felt to be somehow connected with the commercial and subordinate character of my work. But, just as Battista and Emilia had remained untroubled by my ominous preamble, so now they failed to show any relief at all at the wretched confession of weakness that had followed it. Battista said seriously: "But I'm sure, Molteni, you'll write a very fine script."

Having started out on the wrong track, I was now committed to it to the bitter end. I answered in a tone of exasperation: "I am afraid I didn't make myself clear. I am a writer for the theater, Battista, not one of the large number of professional writers of film-scripts . . . and this script, however fine, however perfect it is, will be, for me, merely a script . . . a thing—allow me to say frankly—that I do simply in order to earn money . . . Now at the age of twenty-seven one has what are commonly called ideals—and my ideal is to write for the theater! . . . Why am I unable to do so? Because the world to-day is so constructed that no one can do what he would like to do, and he is forced, instead, to do what others wish him to do. Because the question of money always intrudes—into what we do, into what we are, into what we wish to become, into our work, into our highest aspirations, even into our relations with the people we love!"

I realized that I had become over-excited and that my eyes had actually filled with tears. And I was ashamed and in my heart I cursed my excess of feeling which encouraged me to make confidences of this kind to the man who, a few moments earlier, had successfully tried to entice my wife away from me. But Battista was not put out of countenance for so small a matter. "You know, Molteni," he said, "hearing you talk, I seem to see myself again at the time when I was your age."

"Oh, really?" I stammered, disconcerted.

"Yes, I was extremely poor," pursued Battista, helping himself to more wine, "and I also had, as you say, ideals . . . What those ideals were, I could not now say, and perhaps I did not know even then . . . but I had them nevertheless . . . or perhaps I did not have this or that ideal, but Ideals with a capital I . . . Then I met a man to whom I owe a very great deal, if only for having taught me certain things." Battista paused a moment, with characteristic, heavy solemnity, and I could not help calling to mind, almost involuntarily, that the man to whom he was alluding was without doubt a certain film producer, forgotten now, but famous in the days of the early Italian cinema, with whom, and under whose orders, Battista had indeed started out upon his prosperous career; a man who, however, as far as I knew, was to be admired for nothing except his capacity for making money. "To that man," Battista went on, "I made more or less the same speech as you've made to me this evening. You know what he answered me? That ideals, until one knows exactly what one wants, are best forgotten and put aside . . . but, as soon as one has planted one's foot on solid ground, then one should remember them, and *that* should become the ideal . . . the first thousand-lire note one earns—*that*'s the best ideal! Then, as he said to me, one's ideal develops and becomes a film studio, a theater, films that have been made and that are going to be made—one's everyday work, in fact. That's what he said to me . . . and I did as he told me and everything turned out well. But you—you have the great advantage of knowing what your ideal is—to write plays. Well, you *will* write them!"

"I *will* write them?" I could not help asking, feeling doubtful but, at the same time, already somewhat comforted.

"Yes, you will write them," Battista affirmed; "you will write them if you really want to, even if you *are* working for money, even if you *are* making scripts for Triumph Films. D'you want to know what the secret of success is, Molteni?"

"What is it?"

"Get into the queue, in life, just as you get into the queue at the booking-office, at the station. Our moment always comes, if we have patience and don't change queues. Our moment always comes, and the booking-office clerk gives each person his ticket . . . each person according to his merits, of course . . . anyone who is going a long way, and is capable of doing so, may even be given a ticket for Australia. Others who are not going so far are given tickets for shorter journeys—for Capri, possibly!" He laughed, pleased with this ambiguous allusion to our journey, and then added: "I hope you yourself may receive a ticket for a very far-off destination . . . how about America?"

I looked at Battista, who was smiling at me in a fatherly manner, and then I looked at Emilia and saw that she too was smiling; it was a very faint smile, it is true, but no less sincere on that account—at least so it seemed to me. And I realized once again that Battista, that day, had somehow managed to change her aversion into a feeling that was almost one of liking for him. At this thought I was overwhelmed anew by the sadness that had assailed me when it seemed to me that I detected Signora Pasetti's look in the eyes of Emilia. I said sadness, rather than jealousy: in reality

I was extremely tired, owing both to the journey and to the various events of the day, and weariness was intermingled with all my feelings, even the most violent, deadening them and changing them into an impotent, despairing melancholy.

Dinner came to an end in unexpected fashion. After listening sympathetically to Battista, Emilia appeared suddenly to remember me—or rather, to remember my existence—in a manner that once again confirmed my uneasiness. To an insignificant remark from me: "We might go out on the terrace . . . the moon should have risen by now" she replied: "I don't want to go out on the terrace . . . I'm going to bed. I'm tired;" and without more ado she got up, said good night to us, and went out. Battista did not appear to be surprised at this abrupt departure; in fact—or so it seemed to me—he looked almost pleased at it, as a flattering indication of the havoc he had contrived to create in Emilia's mind. But I felt my uneasiness to be doubled. And although, as I said, I felt exhausted, although I was well aware that it would have been better to postpone all explanations till next day, in the end I could no longer contain myself. With the excuse that I felt sleepy, I too said good night to Battista and left the room.

16

My bedroom communicated with Emilia's by means of an inside door. Without any delay I went to this door and knocked. Emilia called to me to come in.

She was sitting on the bed, quite still, in a thoughtful attitude. When she saw me, she at once asked, in a weary, irritable voice: "What more do you want of me?"

"Nothing at all," I answered coldly, for I felt perfectly calm and lucid now, also less tired; "just to wish you good night."

"Or is it that you want to know what I think of the conversation you had this evening with Battista? Well, if you want to know, I'll tell you at once: it was not only inopportune but ridiculous as well."

I took a chair and sat down, then asked: "Why?"

"I don't understand you," she said, annoyed, "really I don't understand you. You set so much store by this script, and then you go and tell the producer that you're working simply to make money, that you don't like the work, that your ideal would be to write for the theater, and so on. But don't you realize that although, out of politeness, he gave in to you this evening, tomorrow he'll think it over, and he'll take good care not to give you any more work? Can't you possibly understand a thing as simple as that?"

So she launched her attack. And although I knew she was doing it in order to conceal other, more important, anxieties from me, I still could not help noticing a certain sincerity in her voice, however painful and humiliating it might be for me. I had promised myself that I would keep calm. But her tone of utter contempt made me flare up in spite of myself. "But it's the truth," I cried all of a sudden; "I don't like this job, I've never liked it. And it's by no means certain that I'm going to do it."

"Of course you're going to do it." Never had she despised me so much as at this moment.

I set my teeth and tried to control myself. "Perhaps I may not do it," I said in a normal voice. "I had intended to do it even as late as this morning . . . but certain things have happened during the course of today which will cause me, in all probability, to announce to Battista, not later than tomorrow, that I am giving it up."

I uttered this sibylline remark deliberately, with a feeling almost of vindictiveness. She had tortured me so much, and now I wanted to torture her by alluding to what I had seen through the window, without, however, speaking of it directly or precisely. She looked at me fixedly, and then asked in a quiet voice: "What things have happened?"

"Plenty of things."

"But what?"

She was insistent: it seemed to me that she sincerely desired me to accuse her, to reprove her for her unfaithfulness. But I continued to be evasive. "They're things to do with the film . . . things between myself and Battista . . . there's no need to mention them."

"Why don't you want to mention them?"

"Because they wouldn't interest you."

"Possibly; but you won't have the courage to give up the job. You'll do it all right."

I could not quite make out whether this remark showed merely the usual contempt, or whether it contained an unspecified hope. I asked, cautiously: "Why do you think so?"

"Because I know you." She paused a moment and then sought to gloss over what she had said. "It's always like that with film-scripts, anyhow. . . . How many times have I known you declare that you wouldn't do this or that job, and then you've done it! The difficulties in scripts always get smoothed out in the end."

"That may be, but this time the difficulty is not in the script."

"Where is it, then?"

"In myself."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Battista kissing you," I should have liked to reply. But I restrained myself: our relationship had never been clarified right down to the bare truth, it had always been carried on by means of allusions. Before we reached the truth, there were so many other things that would have to be said. I bent forward slightly and declared with the greatest seriousness: "Emilia, you already know the reason; as I said at dinner, it's because I'm tired of working for other people and want at last to work for myself."

"And who's preventing you?"

"You," I said emphatically; then, seeing at once that she started to make a gesture of protest: "Not you directly . . . but your presence in my life. . . . Our relations are unfortunately—what they are: don't let's speak of them . . . but all the same you are my wife, and I, as I've told you before, I take on these jobs mainly because of you. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't accept them. To put it briefly—you know it perfectly well and there's no need for me to repeat it—we have a great many debts, we still have several instalments to pay on the flat, even the car hasn't yet been completely paid for . . . that's why I do these film-scripts. Now, however, I want to make you a suggestion."

"What?"

I imagined myself to be very calm, very lucid, very reasonable; and yet at the same time a faint feeling of uneasiness warned me that there was a certain falsity—a worse than falsity, an absurdity—in my calm, in my lucidity, in my reasonableness. After all, I had seen her in Battista's arms: and that alone was what should have mattered. I went on, nevertheless: "The suggestion I want to make to you is as follows: that you yourself should decide whether I am to do this script or not. I promise you that if you tell me not to do it, I'll go and tell Battista so, first thing tomorrow morning—and we'll leave Capri by the first boat."

She did not raise her head, but appeared to be meditating. "You're very cunning," she said at last.

"Why?"

"Because, if you regret it afterwards, you'll always be able to say it was my fault!"

"I shan't say anything of the kind . . . considering it's I myself who am asking you to decide."

She was now, obviously, reflecting upon the answer that she should give me. And I saw that her answer would provide an implicit corroboration of her feeling for me, whatever it might be. If she told me to do the script, it would mean that she now despised me to the point of considering that my work could continue, in spite of everything; if her answer, on the other hand, was in the negative, it would imply that she still retained some respect for me and did not want me to be dependent on her lover for my work. And so, after all, I came back again to the usual question: whether she despised me and why she despised me. At last she said: "These are things that one can't allow other people to decide for one!"

"But I'm asking you to decide."

"Then remember you insisted on my deciding," she said all at once, with sudden solemnity.

"Yes, I shall remember."

"Well, I think that, since you've taken on the job, you ought not to give it up. You yourself, in any case, have said that to me many times. Battista might be annoyed and never give you any more work. I think you should certainly do this job."

I thought of that kiss, and said, in an almost hostile manner: "Very well then. But don't tell me later on that you gave me this advice because you'd realized that, really and truly, I wanted to do the job . . . like that day when I had to sign the contract. Let it be quite clear that I *don't* want to do it."

"Ugh, you've exhausted me," she said carelessly, getting up from the bed and going over to the wardrobe. "That's my advice, anyhow . . . but of course you can do what you like . . ."

She had reassumed her tone of contempt, thus confirming my suppositions. And quite suddenly I experienced the same pain that I had felt that first time in Rome, when she had flung her aversion in my face. I could not help exclaiming: "Emilia, why all this? . . . Why are we so hostile to each other?"

She had opened the wardrobe and was looking at herself at the mirror on the door. She said, in an absent-minded way: "Well, well, it's life, I suppose!"

Her words took my breath away, leaving me rigid and silent. Emilia had never spoken to me in that way, with such indifference and apathy and in so conventional a phrase. I knew I could have reversed the situation again by telling her I had seen her with Battista, as she herself knew perfectly well; that, in asking her to decide for me about the film-script, I had simply wished to put her to the test—which was true; and that, in short, the question between her and me was still the same as ever. But I had not the courage, or rather, the strength, to say these things: I felt utterly tired, and quite unable to start all over again. So, instead, I said, almost timidly: "And what will you do all the time we're in Capri, while I'm working on the film?"

"Nothing special. I'll go for walks . . . and swim, and sunbathe . . . the same as everyone does."

"All alone?"

"Yes, all alone."

"Won't you be bored, alone?"

"I'm never bored. I've plenty of things to think about!"

"Do you sometimes think about me?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"And what do you think?" I too had risen, and had gone over to her and taken her hand.

"We've talked about that so many times already." She resisted my hold, yet without disengaging her hand.

"Do you still think about me in the same way?"

This time she pulled herself away from me and said brusquely: "Now listen, you'd better go to bed. I know there are certain things you don't like, and indeed it's quite natural. On the other hand, I can only repeat what I've said before. What's the point of talking about them again?"

"But I *do* want to talk about them again."

"Why? I should only have to say again all the things I've already said so many times. I haven't changed my mind just because I've come to Capri: on the contrary."

"What do you mean by 'on the contrary'?"

"When I said 'on the contrary,' " she explained rather confusedly, "I meant that I haven't changed—that's all."

"You still have the same . . . the same feeling about me, in fact? Isn't that so?"

Unexpectedly, and in an almost tearful voice, she protested. "Why do you torment me like this? Do you think it gives me any pleasure to say these things to you? I dislike them more than you do!"

I was moved by the pain which I seemed to detect in her voice. Taking her hand again, I said: "Anyhow, *I* think a great deal of *you* . . . and I always shall," I added, as though to make her see that I forgave her for her unfaithfulness, which indeed was true, "whatever happens."

She said nothing. She looked away, and seemed to be waiting. But at the same time I felt her trying to disengage her hand from mine, with a sly but persistent and obstinately hostile movement. And so I abruptly bade her good night and left the room. It was with a sharp renewal of pain that I heard the key, almost at once, being turned in the lock.

17

NEXT MORNING I ROSE EARLY, and, without taking steps to find out where Battista and Emilia were, left—or rather, made my escape from—the house. After the night's rest, the happenings of the previous day and, above all, my own behavior, appeared in an unpleasant light, as a series of absurdities which had been confronted in an equally absurd fashion; now I wanted to think calmly over what I ought to do, without compromising my own freedom of action by some hurried and irreparable decision. So I left the house, went back over the path I had traversed the evening before, and made my way to the hotel where Rheingold was staying. I inquired for him and was told he was in the garden. I followed; and at the far end of an avenue caught sight of the slender parapet of a summer-house bathed in the brilliant light of the calm, sun-filled sea and sky. A few chairs and a small table were arranged in front of the parapet, and as I appeared someone rose to his feet with a gesture of greeting. It was Rheingold, all dressed up like a naval captain, in a white cap with a gold anchor on it, a blue jacket with gold buttons, and white trousers. On the table was a tray with the remains of breakfast; also a portfolio and writing materials.

Rheingold seemed extremely cheerful. He immediately asked me: "I say, Molteni—what d'you think of a morning like this?"

"I think it's an exquisitely beautiful morning."

"What would you say, Molteni," he went on, taking me by the arm and turning with me towards the parapet, "what would you say to letting our work go hang, hiring a boat and rowing slowly all round the island? Don't you think it would be better, infinitely better?"

I answered him without conviction, thinking in my heart that an excursion of that kind in the company of Rheingold would lose a good deal of its charm. "Yes," I said, "in a sense it would be better."

"You've said it, Molteni!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "In a sense . . . But in what sense? Not in the sense in which *we* understand life. For us life means duty—doesn't it, Molteni? Duty, first and foremost . . . and so, Molteni, to work!" He left the parapet and sat down again at the table; then, leaning towards me and looking into my eyes, he said, with a certain solemnity: "Sit down here, opposite me . . . this morning we'll just talk. I have a great many things to say to you."

I sat down. Rheingold adjusted his cap over his eyes and resumed: "You will remember, Molteni, that I was explaining my interpretation of the *Odyssey* to you during our drive from Rome to Naples . . . but this explanation was interrupted by the appearance of Battista. Then, for the rest of the journey I was asleep, and so the explanation was postponed. You remember, Molteni?"

"Yes, certainly I do."

"You will also remember that I gave you the key to the *Odyssey*—in this way: Ulysses takes ten years to return home because really, in his subconscious mind, he does not *want* to return."

"Yes, indeed."

"I will now reveal to you, then, the reason why, according to my idea, Ulysses does not want to return home," said Rheingold. He paused a moment as if to mark the beginning of the revelation, and then, wrinkling his eyebrows and gazing at me with characteristic dictatorial seriousness, he went on: "Ulysses, in his subconscious mind, does not wish to return to Ithaca because in reality his relations with Penelope are unsatisfactory. That's the reason, Molteni. And these relations had been unsatisfactory even before the departure of Ulysses to the war . . . in fact really Ulysses had gone off to the war because he was unhappy at home . . . and he was unhappy at home precisely because of his unsatisfactory relations with his wife!"

Rheingold was silent for a moment, but without ceasing to frown in that half-dictatorial, half-didactic manner; and I took advantage of the pause to turn my chair so that I did not have the sun in my eyes. Then he continued: "If his relations with Penelope had been good, Ulysses would not have gone off to the war. Ulysses was not a swaggerer or a warmonger. Ulysses was a prudent, wise, wary kind of man. If his relations with his wife had been good, Ulysses, simply in order to prove to Menelaus that he supported him, would perhaps just have sent an expeditionary force under the command of some man he trusted . . . instead of which he went off himself, taking advantage of the war to leave home and thus escape from his wife."

"Very logical."

"Very psychological, you mean, Molteni," corrected Rheingold, having noticed, perhaps, a touch of irony in my tone, "very psychological. And remember that everything depends upon psychology; without psychology there is no character, without character there is no story. Now, what is the psychology of Ulysses and Penelope? This is it: Penelope is the traditional feminine figure of archaic, feudal, aristocratic Greece; she is virtuous, noble, proud, religious, a good housewife, a good mother, a good wife. Ulysses, on the other hand, anticipates, in character, the men of a later Greece, the Greece of the sophists and the philosophers. Ulysses is a man without prejudices, and, if necessary, without scruples, subtle, reasonable, intelligent, irreligious, sceptical, sometimes even cynical."

"It seems to me," I protested, "that you're blackening the character of Ulysses. In reality, in the *Odyssey*—"

But he interrupted me impatiently. "We're not going to worry ourselves in the least about the *Odyssey*. Or rather, we're going to interpret, to develop the *Odyssey*. We're making a film, Molteni. The *Odyssey* is already written . . . the film is yet to be made!"

I was silent again, and he resumed: "The reason for the bad relations between Ulysses and Penelope must therefore be sought in the difference between their characters. Before the Trojan War, Ulysses had done something to displease Penelope. What? This is where the suitors come in. In the *Odyssey*, we know that they aspire to the hand of Penelope and in the meantime live extravagantly at Ulysses' expense, in his house. We've got to reverse the situation."

I gazed at him open-mouthed. "Don't you understand?" He asked. "Well, I'll explain it to you at once. As for the suitors, it may perhaps be convenient for us to reduce them to one person, Antinous, for instance. The suitors, then, have been in love with Penelope since before the Trojan War . . . and, being in love, they shower presents upon her, according to Greek custom. Penelope, being proud and dignified, in the antique manner, would like to refuse their presents, would, above all things, like her husband to turn the suitors out. But Ulysses, for some reason that we don't know but that we shall easily find, does not wish to offend the suitors. As a reasonable man, he does not attach much importance to their courting of his wife, since he knows she is faithful; nor does he attribute much significance to their gifts, which perhaps do not really displease him at all. Remember that all Greeks were greedy for presents, Molteni. Naturally Ulysses does not for a moment advise Penelope to yield to the suitors' desires, but merely not to offend them because he does not consider it worth while. Ulysses wants a quiet life, and he hates scandals. Penelope, who was expecting anything rather than this passive attitude on Ulysses' part, is disgusted, almost incredulous. She protests, she rebels . . . but Ulysses is not to be shaken, there seems to him no cause for indignation . . . so he again advises Penelope to accept the presents, to behave kindly—what does it cost her, after all? And Penelope, in the end, follows her husband's advice . . . but at the same time conceives a deep contempt for him . . . She feels she no longer loves him, and tells him so . . . Ulysses then realizes, too late, that, by his prudence, he has destroyed Penelope's love. Ulysses then tries to remedy matters, to win his wife back again, but he is unsuccessful. His life at Ithaca becomes a hell. Finally, in desperation, he seizes the opportunity of the Trojan War to leave home. After seven years the war ends and he puts to sea again to return to Ithaca, but he knows he is awaited at home by a woman who no longer loves him, who, in fact, despises him, and therefore, unconsciously he welcomes any excuse for putting off this unpleasant, this dreaded, return . . . and yet, sooner or later, return he must. But, on his return, the same thing happens to him as happened to the cavalier in the legend of the dragon—do you remember, Molteni? The princess demanded that the cavalier should kill the dragon if he wished to be worthy of her love, so the cavalier killed the dragon and then the princess loved him. In the same way Penelope, at Ulysses' return, after proving that she had been faithful to him, gave him to understand that her faithfulness did not mean love but merely virtue: she would recover her love for him on one, and only one, condition—that he would slay the suitors. Ulysses, as we know, was not in the least bloodthirsty or vindictive; he would perhaps have preferred to dismiss the suitors by gentler means, by persuasion. But this time he made up his mind, knowing, in fact, that upon killing of the suitors depends the esteem of Penelope and consequently her love also. So he kills them. Then, and only then, does Penelope cease to despise him, only then does she love him again. And so Ulysses and Penelope are again in love, after all those years of separation, and they celebrate their true marriage—their *'Bluthochzeit,'* their blood-marriage. Well, do you understand, Molteni? Now to sum up! Point one: Penelope despises Ulysses for not having reacted like a man, like a husband, and like a king, to the indiscreet behavior of the suitors. Point two: her contempt causes the departure of Ulysses to the Trojan War. Point three: Ulysses, knowing that he is awaited at home by a woman who despises him, delays his return as long as he can. Point four: in order to regain Penelope's esteem and love, Ulysses slays the suitors. Do you understand, Molteni?"

I said I understood. All this was not very difficult to understand. But now, the feeling of aversion I had had for Rheingold's interpretation from the very beginning sprang up again, stronger than ever, and it made me perplexed and bemused. In the meantime Rheingold was explaining pedantically: "Do you know how I arrived at this key to the whole situation? By means of a simple consideration of the slaughter of the suitors, as it is told in the *Odyssey*. I observed that this slaughter, brutal, ferocious, ruthless as it was, was in absolute contrast to the character of Ulysses as hitherto presented to us: cunning, flexible, subtle, reasonable, cautious . . . and I said to myself: 'Ulysses might very well have politely shown the suitors the door . . . he had the possibility of doing this; being in his own house, and being king, all he had to do was to show himself as such. As he doesn't do it, it is a sign that he has some good reason for not doing it. What reason? Obviously Ulysses wishes to prove that not only is he cunning, flexible, subtle, reasonable, cautious, but also, if necessary, as violent as Ajax, as unreasonable as Achilles, as ruthless as Agamemnon. And to whom does he want to prove this? Obviously to Penelope—and so: eureka!' "

I said nothing. Rheingold's argument was very nicely worked out, and fitted in perfectly with his inclination to transform the *Odyssey* into a psychoanalytical case-history. But, precisely because of that, it gave me a feeling of great repugnance, as though I were confronted with a kind of profanation. In Homer, everything was simple, pure, noble, ingenuous, even the astuteness of Ulysses, poetically contained as it was within the limits of an intellectual superiority. In Rheingold's interpretation, on the other hand, everything was debased to the level of a modern play, full of moralizings and psychologizings. In the meantime Rheingold, extremely pleased with his own exposition, was concluding: "As you see, Molteni, the film's already there, in all its details . . . all we have to do is to write it down."

I broke in, almost violently: "Look here, Rheingold, I don't care for this interpretation of yours at all!"

He opened his eyes very wide, more astonished, one would have said, by my boldness than by my disagreement. "You don't care for it, my dear Molteni? And why don't you care for it?"

I answered with an effort, but with an assurance that grew steadily as I spoke: "I don't care for it because your interpretation implies a complete falsification of the original character of Ulysses. In the *Odyssey* Ulysses is described, certainly, as a man who is subtle, reasonable, astute if you like, but always within the bounds of honor and dignity. He never ceases to be a hero, that is, a brave warrior, a king, an upright husband. Your interpretation—if you will allow me to say so, my dear Rheingold—runs the risk of making him into a man without dignity, without honor, without decency . . . apart from the fact that it's much too far removed from the *Odyssey*."

As I spoke, I saw Rheingold's half-moon smile grow narrower and narrower till it faded away altogether. Then he said, in a harsh tone and putting into his voice a Teutonic accent which he generally managed to conceal: "My dear Molteni, allow me to say that, as usual, you have understood nothing at all!"

"As usual?" I repeated, hurt.

"Yes, as usual," asserted Rheingold; "and I say so at once because—now listen to me carefully, Molteni."

"I'm listening, you can be sure of that."

"I do not wish to make Ulysses, as you seem to imagine, into a man without dignity, or decency, or honor. I merely want to make him into the man who appears in the *Odyssey* . . . Who is Ulysses in the *Odyssey*, what does he represent? Ulysses in the *Odyssey* is, simply, civilized man, he he represents civilization. Amongst all the other heroes who are, to be precise, *non*-civilized men, Ulysses is the only one who *is* civilized. And in what does Ulysses' civilized quality consist? It consists in not having prejudices, in always making use of reason, at all costs, even in questions—as you say—of decency, of dignity, of honor . . . in being intelligent, objective, I would almost say scientific. Naturally," Rheingold went on, "civilization has its inconveniences. It forgets, for instance, very easily, the importance that so-called questions of honor have for people who are not civilized. Penelope is not a civilized woman, she is a woman of tradition.

She does not understand reason, she only understands instinct, blood, pride. Now listen carefully, Molteni, and try to understand me. Civilization, to all those who are not civilized, may appear—in fact often does appear—to be corruption, immorality, lack of principles, cynicism. That, for instance, was the complaint that Hitler, a man who was certainly not civilized, had to make against civilization, and he too talked a great deal about honor, but we know now what Hitler was and what honor meant to *him*. In the *Odyssey*—to put it briefly—Penelope represents barbarism and Ulysses civilization. Do you know, Molteni, that you, whom I thought to be civilized like Ulysses, argue just like the barbarian Penelope?"

These last words were uttered with a broad and brilliant smile: obviously Rheingold was extremely well pleased with his bright idea of comparing me to Penelope. But I felt this comparison, for some unknown reason, to be quite particularly distasteful. In fact I believe I turned pale with anger, and I said, in a voice that trembled: "If by civilization you mean that a husband should give a helping hand to the man who is courting his wife, well, my dear Rheingold, in that case I am, and I feel, a barbarian."

This time, however, much to my surprise, Rheingold did not lose his temper. "One moment," he said, raising his hand; "you're not being reasonable this morning, Molteni, just like Penelope. Now let's do this. You go off and have a swim now, and think it over. Then, tomorrow morning, come back here and tell me the result of your reflections—is that all right?"

Disconcerted, I answered: "Yes, that's all right . . . but I doubt if I shall change my mind."

"You go and think it over," repeated Rheingold, rising and holding out his hand.

I, too, rose to my feet. Rheingold added serenely: "I'm sure that tomorrow, when you've thought it over, you'll agree with me."

"I don't think so," I replied. And I walked away, down the path towards the hotel.

13

I HAD NOT BEEN WITH Rheingold for more than an hour: the discussion about the *Odyssey* had lasted about that length of time. I had, therefore, the whole day in front of me to "think it over," as he had expressed it, to make up my mind, in fact, as to whether I accepted his interpretation or not. To tell the truth, as soon as I came out of the hotel, my first thought was by no means to meditate over Rheingold's ideas but rather to chase away even the very memory of them and enjoy the beauty of the day. On the other hand I felt that there was something in Rheingold's ideas that went right outside the limits of film production; something I could not define, but which had been revealed to me by my excessively strong reaction. And so, after all, I really should have to "think it over." I recalled that, when I left the villa that morning, I had caught a glimpse of a small, lonely cove down below the house, so I decided to go there: there I should be able to take the director's advice and "think it over"; or, if I preferred, not think about it at all but simply take a swim in the sea.

I took the same path as before, therefore, the path that runs around the island. It was still early, and I met scarcely anyone along the shady track—a few boys whose bare feet, in the surrounding silence, made a soft sound on the brick paving; a couple of little girls who walked along with arms round each other's shoulders, chatting in low voices; two or three old ladies taking their dogs for a walk.

At the lowest point of the path I turned off down the narrow lane that winds along the loneliest and most precipitous part of the island. I walked a little farther and found myself confronted by a fork: a smaller path branched off from the lane, leading to a summer-house perched at the edge of a precipice. I turned into this path and, when I reached the summer-house, looked down. The sea, three hundred feet below, trembled and sparkled in the sun, shifting and changing color according to the wind, blue in one place, almost violet in another, green farther away. From this remote, silent sea the perpendicular rocks of the island seemed to be flying to meet me, to be coming upward in swarms, like arrows, their bare points flashing in the sun. Then, all at once, a kind of suicidal exaltation came over me, and I felt I had no further desire to live; and I said to myself that if at that moment I suddenly launched myself into that luminous immensity I should perhaps die in a manner not altogether unworthy of the better part of myself. Yes, I should be killing myself to attain, in death, the purity which in life I had failed to achieve.

The temptation to suicide was genuine, and perhaps, for a moment, my life was really in danger. Then, almost instinctively, I thought of Emilia, wondering how she would receive the news of my death, and suddenly I said to myself: "You wouldn't be killing yourself because you're tired of life; you're not tired of life. You would be killing yourself for Emilia!" I was disconcerted by this idea, which, almost maliciously, it seemed, robbed my exaltation of all quality of disinterestedness. Then I went on to ask myself: "Because of Emilia or for the sake of Emilia? The distinction is important"; and immediately I answered my own question:

"For the sake of Emilia. In order to regain her esteem, even in a posthumous way. In order to leave her with the remorse of having unjustly despised you."

No sooner had I formulated this thought, then—as in a children's puzzle, when a number of disordered pieces are put together to form a single design—the picture of my present situation was, in part, completed by this new idea: "You reacted to Rheingold's theories in that violent manner because in reality it seemed to you that, when he was explaining the relations between Ulysses and Penelope, he was alluding, though he did not know it, to the relations between you and Emilia. When Rheingold spoke of Penelope's contempt for Ulysses, you thought of Emilia's contempt for you. The truth, in short, annoyed you, and it was against the truth that you protested."

The picture was still not complete; but now a few more considerations put the last, final touches to it. "You thought of killing yourself because you're not clear in your own mind. In reality, if you want to regain Emilia's esteem, it's not in the least necessary for you to kill yourself, much less than that will suffice. Rheingold indicated what you ought to do. Ulysses, in order to regain Penelope's love, killed the suitors. In theory, you ought to kill Battista, but we live in a less violent and uncompromising world than that of the *Odyssey*. All you need to do is to throw up the script, break off all relations with Rheingold, and leave again for Rome tomorrow morning. Emilia advised you not to throw up the job because, in reality, she *wants* to despise you and wants you, by your behavior, to confirm her in her contempt. You mustn't take any notice of her advice; you must act, instead, just as—according to Rheingold—Ulysses acted."

This was, in truth, the whole matter: I had examined my situation from beginning to end, ruthlessly and with complete sincerity. It seemed to me clear that there was now no further need to "think it over," as Rheingold had advised; I could go straight back to him and announce what was now my immovable decision. But the next moment I said to myself that, just because there was now no necessity to "think it over," I must not do things in a hurry, and so give a wrong impression of rashness and obstinacy. I would go during the afternoon, quite calmly, to Rheingold and tell him what I had decided. When I returned home I would, in the same calm manner, ask Emilia to pack her bags. As for Battista, I decided to say nothing to him; in the morning, when we left, I would leave him a short note, attributing my decision to the fact that my ideas and those of Rheingold were incompatible—which was, indeed, true. Battista was a shrewd man: he would understand, and I should not see him again.

With these thoughts in my mind, and almost without realizing where I was going, I turned into the lane, went along it until I was below the villa, and then started running down a steep, crumbling path towards the little lonely cove of which I had had a glimpse when I came out that morning. I was out of breath when I reached it, and, to recover myself, I stood still for a moment on a rock, looking round. The brief stretch of stony beach was all surrounded by great irregular masses of rock which looked as if they had that very moment come rolling down from the heights above; two rocky promontories closed it in, rising sheer from the green, transparent water which was penetrated by rays of sunlight that showed up the white, pebbly bottom. Then I noticed a black rock, all crannied and corroded and half submerged in sand and water, and thought I would go and lie down behind it to be sheltered from the sun which was already very strong. But no sooner had I walked round it than I caught sight of Emilia lying, quite naked, on the beach.

To tell the truth, I did not at once recognize her, for her face was hidden by a big straw hat; in fact my first impulse was to retreat, as I thought I had come upon some unknown sun-bather. Then my eye fell on the arm which was stretched out on the pebbles, and, following the arm down to the hand, I recognized, on the forefinger, a ring in the shape of two little hardstone acorns set in golden husks which I had given Emilia some time before as a birthday present.

I was right behind Emilia and saw her foreshortened. She was naked, as I said, and her clothes were lying beside her on the sand, a little pile of colored garments; it seemed impossible that they could have covered that large body. The thing that struck me most, indeed, about Emilia's nudity, from the very first glance, was not this or that detail, but, in general, the size and powerfulness of her body. I knew, of course, that Emilia was no larger than a great many other women; but at that moment her nudity seemed to me immense, as though the sea and sky had lent her some of their vastness. As she was lying flat on her back, her breasts were only vaguely defined by the slight swelling of the stretched-out muscle, but to my eyes they seemed very large, both in outline and in volume and in the rosy circles of the nipples; so did also her hips, spread out over the sand in strong, comfortable amplitude; so also her belly, that seemed to gather all the light of the sun into its circle of flesh; and so her legs, which, lower than the rest of her body on account of the slope, looked as though they were being pulled downwards by their weight and by length. All of a sudden I wondered what could be the source of this feeling in me, of this sense of largeness and power, so profound and so disturbing, and then I realized that it arose from the desire that had been re-awoken in me at this unexpected moment. It was a desire which, in its immediacy and urgency, was not so much physical as spiritual, a desire to be united with her, but not with her body, not inside her body; rather, through the medium of her body. I was hungry for her; yet the satisfaction of this hunger did not depend on me but only on her, on an act of consent on her part that would reach out to meet my hunger. And I felt that she refused me this consent, although, naked as she was, she appeared by an illusion of the eye to be offering herself to me.

But I could not remain in indefinite contemplation of this forbidden nakedness. I at last took a step forward and said clearly, amid the surrounding silence: "Emilia!"

She made a rapid, double movement. She threw off her hat, stretched out her hand and snatched a chemise from the pile of clothes, as if to cover herself with it; and at the same time sat up and twisted herself around to look behind her. But when I added: "It's me, Riccardo," she at last saw me, and then she dropped the chemise on the shingle. Meanwhile she remained twisted around in order to see me better. She was afraid first of all, I supposed, that I might be a stranger; but then, seeing that it was I, she judged it no longer necessary to cover herself—as though she were in the presence of someone who actually did not exist. I record this thought, fundamentally absurd though it was, so as to give an exact idea of my state of mind at that moment. It never entered my head that she did not cover herself merely because I was not a stranger but her husband. I was convinced that I no longer existed for her, at any rate from the sexual point of view, and in that ambiguous gesture of hers I naturally recognized a confirmation of my own non-existence. I said in a low voice: "I've been standing here looking at you for at least five minutes . . . do you know, I felt I was seeing you for the first time?"

She said nothing; all she did was to turn a little farther around so as to see me better, at the same time adjusting her dark glasses on her nose with a gesture of indifferent curiosity. I went on: "Do you mind my staying here, or would you rather I went away?"

I saw her considering me; then, with a calm movement, she stretched herself out in the sun again, saying: "Stay if you like, as far as I'm concerned . . . As long as you don't take the sun off me!"

So she really did consider me to be non-existent—nothing but an opaque body that might put itself between the sun and her own, naked body, which, according to my desire, ought on the other hand to have felt itself in relationship with mine and have revealed this relationship in some way, whether by a show of modesty or of alarm. Her indifference disconcerted me in a most painful way; I felt my mouth grow suddenly dry, as though with fear; and I was aware that my face was assuming, against my will, an expression of uneasiness, of bewilderment, of false, distressing assurance. "It's very pleasant here," I said, "I shall take a sunbath too . . ." And, in order to put a good face on it, I sat down at a little distance from her, leaning my back against one of the great lumps of rock.

There followed a very long silence. Endless waves of golden light, gently burning and dazzling, enveloped me, and I could not help half-closing my eyes, with a deep sense of well-being and peace. But I could not pretend to myself that I was there simply for the sun; I felt I could never enjoy it fully unless Emilia loved me. Almost as if I were thinking aloud, I said: "This place seems purposely made for people who love each other."

"Yes, doesn't it!" she echoed, without stirring, from under the straw hat which hid her face.

"Not for us, who no longer love each other!"

This time she said nothing. And I remained with my eyes fixed upon her, feeling, at the sight of her, a return of all the desire that had troubled me shortly before, when I had emerged from between the rocks and seen her for the first time.

Intense feelings have in them the virtue of making us pass from feeling to action in a wholly spontaneous fashion, without the concurrence of the will, almost unconsciously. Without my knowing how it had happened, I found myself no longer sitting apart by myself, with my back against a rock, but kneeling beside Emilia, bending over her with my face held close to hers, while she lay motionless and asleep. I don't know how, but I had already removed the hat that hid her face, and, as I prepared to kiss her, I was looking at her mouth as one sometimes looks at a fruit before putting one's teeth into it. It was a large, very full mouth, and the redness of the lipstick upon it looked parched and cracked as though it had been dried up, not by the sun, but by some interior heat. I said to myself that that mouth had not kissed me for a very long time, and that the savor of the kiss, if it were returned by her as she lay thus between waking and sleeping, would be as intoxicating as that of some old, potent liquor. I think I must have gazed at her mouth for at least a minute; then, gradually, I lowered my lips to hers. But I did not immediately kiss her: I paused for a moment with my lips very close to hers. I felt the light, quiet breath that came from her nostrils; and also, it seemed to me, the warmth of her burning lips. I knew that behind those lips, inside her mouth—like frozen snow preserved in a fold of sun-scorched earth—lay the coolness of her saliva, as surprising, as refreshing as such snow would be. While I was relishing this foretaste, my lips came truly into contact with Emilia's. The touch did not appear to awaken her, nor to surprise her. I pressed my lips against hers, first softly, then more and more strongly; then, seeing that she remained perfectly still, I ventured upon a profounder kiss. This time I felt her mouth slowly opening, as I had hoped—like a shellfish whose valves open at the pulsating movement of some living creature wet with cool sea-water. Slowly, slowly it opened, the lips drawing back over the gums; and at the same time I felt an arm encircling my neck . . .

With a violent jolt, I started and awoke from what must evidently have been a kind of trance induced by the silence and the heat of the sun. In front of me, Emilia was lying on the beach as before; and her face was still hidden by the straw hat. I realized that I had dreamed the kiss, or rather, had actually experienced it in that state of delirious hankering which constantly replaces dreary reality with some more attractive illusion. I had kissed her and she had returned my kiss; but the one who had kissed and the one who had returned the kiss were merely a couple of phantoms evoked by desire and entirely dissociated from our two persons as we lay motionless and apart. I looked at Emilia and wondered suddenly: "Suppose I now tried really to kiss her?" And I answered myself: "No, you won't try . . . you're paralyzed by timidity and by the consciousness of her contempt for you." All at once I said, in a loud voice: "Emilia!"

"What is it?"

"I fell asleep and dreamed I was kissing you."

She said nothing. Frightened by her silence, I was anxious to change the subject, so I went on, at random: "Where's Battista?"

She answered in a quiet voice, from underneath the hat: "I don't know where he is . . . By the way, he won't be at lunch with us today . . . he's lunching with Rheingold at the beach."

Before I knew what I was saying, I blurted out: "Emilia, I saw you yesterday evening, when Battista kissed you in the living-room!"

"I knew you'd seen me. I saw you too." Her voice was quite normal, though slightly muffled by the brim of the hat.

I was disconcerted by the manner in which she received my disclosure; and also, to some extent, by the way in which I myself had made it. The truth of the matter, I thought, was that the stupefying sunshine and the silence of the sea reduced and neutralized our quarrel in a general feeling of vanity and indifference. However, with a great effort, I went on: "Emilia, you and I must have a talk."

"Not now . . . I want to lie in the sun and be quiet."

"This afternoon, then."

"All right, this afternoon."

I rose to my feet and, without looking back, walked off towards the path that led to the villa.

19

AT LUNCH WE SCARCELY SPOKE. Silence seemed to penetrate inside the villa together with the strong light of noon; the sky and sea that filled the big windows dazzled us and gave us a feeling of remoteness, as though all this blueness were a substantial thing, like a depth of water, and we two were sitting at the bottom of the sea, separated by luminous, fluctuating liquid and unable to speak. Moreover I made it a point of duty not to embark upon the explanation with Emilia until the afternoon, as I myself had proposed. It might be imagined that two people who find themselves sitting face to face with an important argument hanging between them do not think of anything else. But this was certainly not the case with us: I was not thinking at all of Battista's kiss or of our relationship; and I was sure that Emilia was not thinking of them either. There was a sort of continuation of the suspense, of the torpor, of the indifference that had prompted me on the beach that morning to put off all explanations till later.

After lunch, Emilia rose and said she was going to rest, and went out. Left alone, I sat still for a while, looking through the windows at the clear, luminous line of the horizon, where the harder blue of the sea joined the deep blue of the sky. A ship, small and black, was advancing along this line, like a fly on a taut thread, and I followed it with my eyes, thinking, for some reason, of all the things that were going on at that moment on board that ship—sailors polishing brasses or washing the decks; the cook washing dishes in his galley; the officers still, perhaps, sitting at table; and, down in the engine-room, half-naked stokers shovelling of coal into the furnaces. It was a small ship, and to me, as I looked at it, it was nothing but a black speck; but from close by it was a large object filled with human beings and human destinies. And, conversely, I thought of the people over there looking from their ship at the coast of Capri; their eyes would perhaps be brought to an unwilling halt by an isolated white spot on the coast, and they would not even suspect that that white spot was the villa and that I was inside it and with me was Emilia and we two did not love each other and Emilia despised me and I did not know how to regain her esteem and her love . . .

I became conscious that I was dozing off, and, with an abrupt burst of energy, decided to put into effect the first part of my plan: to go and inform Rheingold that I had "thought it over" and that, as a result, I would not be collaborating in the script of the film. This decision had the effect upon me of a bucketful of fresh water. Wide awake now, I jumped to my feet and went out of the house.

Half an hour later, having walked rapidly along the path that ran round the island, I entered the hall of the hotel. I sent in my name and went and sat down in an armchair. I felt that my mind was exceedingly lucid, even though with a feverish and somewhat agitated lucidity. But, judging from my growing sense of relief—my joy, almost—at the thought of what I was about to do, I knew that I had at last set out upon the right road. After a few minutes Rheingold entered the hall and came over to me with a clouded, surprised expression in which wonder at my having called at that hour appeared to be mingled with the suspicion that he was about to hear some unpleasant news. For politeness' sake, I asked him: "Perhaps you were asleep, Rheingold? . . . and I've woken you up?"

"No, no," he assured me, "I wasn't asleep, I never sleep in the afternoon . . . But come this way, Molteni, let's go into the bar."

I followed him into the bar, which at that hour was deserted. Rheingold, as though anxious to delay the discussion he anticipated, asked me if I would like something to drink—coffee, a liqueur. He made this suggestion with an air of gloom and reserve, like a miser who is forced to provide expensive hospitality against his will. But I knew that the reason was quite a different one: he would have preferred me not to come at all. Anyhow, I refused; and, after a few polite remarks, I embarked without more ado on the main subject. "You may perhaps be surprised," I said, "that I've come back so soon. I had a whole day to consider it. But there seemed no point in waiting till tomorrow. I've thought about it long enough, and I came to tell you the result of my reflections."

"And what is that result?"

"That I cannot collaborate in this film-script . . . in fact, that I am throwing up the job."

Rheingold did not receive this declaration with any surprise: he was evidently expecting it. But he appeared to be thrown into a kind of agitation. He said at once, in a changed voice: "Molteni, you and I must speak plainly."

"It seems to me I have already spoken extremely plainly: I am not going to do the script of the *Odyssey*."

"And why? Please tell me."

"Because I do not agree with your interpretation of the subject."

"In that case," he retorted, quickly and unexpectedly, "you agree with Battista!"

I do not know why I, in my turn, was irritated by this unforeseen accusation. It had not occurred to me that not to be in agreement with Rheingold meant to be in agreement with Battista! I said angrily: "What's Battista got to do with it? I don't agree with Battista either. But I tell you frankly, Rheingold, if I had to choose between the two, I should prefer Battista every time. I'm sorry, Rheingold: as far as I'm concerned, either one does the *Odyssey* of Homer or else one doesn't do it at all."

"A masquerade in technicolor with naked women, King Kong, stomach dances, brassières, cardboard monsters, model sets!"

"I didn't say that: I said the *Odyssey* of Homer!"

"But the *Odyssey* of Homer is *mine,*" he said with profound conviction, bending forwards, "it's *mine,* Molteni!"

For some unexplained reason I was conscious, all at once, of a desire to offend Rheingold: his false, ceremonious smile, his real, dictatorial hardness, his psychoanalytical obtuseness, all became at that moment intolerable to me. I said furiously: "No, Homer's *Odyssey* is not yours, Rheingold. And I'll say more, since you force me to it: I find Homer's *Odyssey* altogether enchanting and yours altogether repulsive!"

"Molteni!" This time Rheingold appeared really indignant.

"Yes, to me it's repulsive," I went on, becoming heated now, "this desire of yours to reduce, to debase the Homeric hero just because we're incapable of making him as Homer created him, this operation of systematic degradation is repulsive to me, and I'm not going to take part in it at any price."

"Molteni . . . one moment, Molteni!"

"Have you read James Joyce's *Ulysses?*" I interrupted him angrily; "do you know who Joyce is?"

"I've read everything that concerns the *Odyssey,*" replied Rheingold in a deeply offended tone, "but you—"

"Well," I continued passionately, "Joyce also interpreted the *Odyssey* in the modern manner . . . and he went much farther than you do, my dear Rheingold, in the job of modernization—that is, of debasement, of degradation, of profanation. He made Ulysses a cuckold, an onanist, an idler, a capricious, incompetent creature . . . and Penelope a retired whore. Aeolus became a newspaper editor, the descent into the infernal regions the funeral of a boon-companion, Circe a visit to a brothel, and the return to Ithaca the return home at dead of night through the streets of Dublin, with a stop or two on the way to piss in a dark corner. But at least Joyce had the discernment not to bring in the Mediterranean, the sea, the sun, the sky, the unexplored lands of antiquity. He placed the whole story in the muddy streets of a northern city, in taverns and brothels, in bedrooms and lavatories. No sunshine, no sea, no sky . . . everything modern, in other words debased, degraded, reduced to our own miserable stature. But you—you lack Joyce's discretion . . . and therefore I, I repeat, between you and Battista, I prefer Battista, in spite of all his papier mâché. Yes, I prefer Battista. You wanted to know why I don't wish to do this script . . . now you do know!"

I fell back in my armchair, damp with sweat. Rheingold was now looking at me with a hard, serious expression and a deep frown. "You do, in fact, agree with Battista," he said.

"No, I do *not* agree with Battista. I *dis*agree with him."

"On the contrary," said Rheingold suddenly, raising his voice. "You're *not* in disagreement with me, and you *are* in agreement with Battista."

All at once I felt the blood leave my cheeks and knew that I had gone deathly pale. "What do you mean?" I asked in an uneven voice.

Rheingold leant forward and hissed (that is the only word for it) just like a snake when it sees itself threatened: "I mean what I said. Battista came to lunch with me today, and he did not conceal his ideas from me, nor the fact that you share them. You are *not* in disagreement with me, Molteni, and you *are* in agreement with Battista, whatever Battista may desire. To you, art does not matter; all you want is to be paid. That's the truth of it, Molteni . . . all you want is to be paid, at any cost!"

"Rheingold!" I cried suddenly in a loud voice.

"Oh, yes, I understand, my dear sir," he insisted, "and I repeat it to your face: at any cost!"

We were face to face now, breathless, I as white as paper and he scarlet. "Rheingold!" I repeated, still in the same loud, clear voice; but I became aware that it was not so much scorn that was now expressed in my voice as a kind of obscure pain, and that that cry: "Rheingold!" contained a prayer rather than the anger of an offended person who is on the point of passing from verbal to physical violence. Yet at the same time I was conscious of the fact that I was going to hit him. I had no time. Rheingold—strangely, for I thought him an obtuse kind of man—appeared to discern the pain in my voice and, all of a sudden, seemed to check and control himself. He drew back a little and said, in a low, deliberately humble tone: "Excuse me, Molteni. I said things I didn't mean."

I made an agitated gesture, as much as to say "I excuse you," and felt at the same time that my eyes were filling with tears. After a moment's embarrassment Rheingold resumed: "All right, it's understood, then. You won't take part in the script. Have you told Battista yet?"

"No."

"Are you intending to tell him?"

"Please tell him yourself. I don't think I shall see Battista again." I was silent a moment, and then I added: "And tell him also to start looking out for another script-writer. Let it be quite clear, Rheingold."

"What?" he asked in astonishment.

"That I shall not do any script of the *Odyssey* either according to your ideas, or according to Battista's ideas . . . either with you, or with any other director. Do you understand, Rheingold?"

He understood at last, and a light of comprehension came into his eyes. Nevertheless he asked cautiously: "To put it shortly, is it that you don't want to do *my* script, or that you don't want to do this script in any way at all?"

After a moment's reflection, I said: "I've already told you: I don't want to do *your* script. However I quite realize, on the other hand, that if I account for my refusal in that way, I should do you harm in the eyes of Battista. Let's put it like this, then: for you, it's *your* script I don't want to do . . . but, for Battista, let it be understood that I don't want to do the script *whatever* interpretation may be given to the subject. Tell Battista, then, that I don't feel like it, that I'm tired, that my nerves are worn out . . . is that all right?"

Rheingold appeared at once to be much relieved by my suggestion. He insisted, nevertheless: "And will Battista believe it?"

"He'll believe it, don't worry . . . you'll see, he'll believe it."

A long silence ensued. We both felt embarrassed now; our recent quarrel still hung in the air and neither of us could quite manage to forget it. At last Rheingold said: "Yet, I'm very sorry you're not going to collaborate in this work, Molteni. Perhaps we might have come to an agreement."

"I don't think so."

"Perhaps the differences were not so great, after all."

Feeling perfectly calm now, I said firmly: "No, Rheingold, they were very great indeed. It may be that you're right to see the *Odyssey* in that way, but I'm convinced that, even today, the *Odyssey* could be made as Homer wrote it."

"That's an aspiration on your part, Molteni. You aspire after a world like that of Homer . . . you would like it to be so . . . but unfortunately it isn't!"

I said conciliatingly: "Let's leave it at that, then: I aspire after that sort of world. You, on the other hand, do not!"

"Oh yes, I do, Molteni . . . who doesn't? But when it's a question of making a film, aspirations are not enough."

There was a further silence. I looked at Rheingold and realized that, even though he understood my reasons, he was still not altogether convinced. Suddenly I asked him: "No doubt you know the Ulysses canto in Dante, Rheingold?"

"Yes," he answered, a little surprised at my question, "I know it, but I don't remember it exactly."

"Do you mind if I recite it to you? I know it by heart."

"Please do, if you care to."

I did not know precisely why I wanted to recite this passage from Dante—perhaps, I thought afterwards, because it seemed to me the best way of repeating certain things to Rheingold without running the risk of offending him afresh. While the director was settling himself in his armchair, and his face assuming a submissive expression, I added: "In this canto Dante makes Ulysses relate his own end and that of his companions."

"Yes, I know, Molteni, I know; recite it then."

I concentrated my thoughts for a moment, looking down on the floor, and then began: "*The greater horn of the ancient flame began to shake itself, murmuring, just like a flame that struggles with the wind*"—continuing steadily in a normal voice and, as far as I could, without emphasis. Rheingold, after considering me for a moment, with a frown, from beneath the peak of his cloth cap, turned his eyes in the direction of the sea and sat without moving. I went on with my recitation, speaking slowly and clearly. But at the lines: "*'O brothers!' I said, 'who through a hundred thousand dangers have reached the West, deny not, to this brief vigil of your sense that remains, experience of the unpeopled world behind the Sun'*"—I felt that my voice, in spite of myself, was trembling with sudden emotion. I considered how there was contained, in those few lines, not merely the idea I had formed of the figure of Ulysses, but also of myself and of my life as it ought to have been and, alas, was not; and I realized that my emotion arose from the clarity and beauty of this idea in comparison with my own actual powerlessness. However I more or less succeeded in controlling the tremor in my voice and went on, without stumbling, to the very last lines: "*Three times it made her whirl round with all the waters; at the fourth, made the poop rise up and prow go down, as pleased Another, till the sea was closed above us.*" The moment I had finished I jumped to my feet. Rheingold also rose from his armchair.

"Allow me, Molteni," he said at once, hastily, "allow me to ask you . . . Why did you recite this fragment of Dante to me? . . . For what purpose? It's very beautiful, of course —but why?"

"This, Rheingold," I said, "this is the Ulysses I should have liked to create . . . this is how I see Ulysses . . . Before leaving you I wanted to confirm it unmistakably . . . I felt I could do this better by reciting the passage from Dante than in my own words."

"Better, of course . . . but Dante is Dante: a man of the Middle Ages . . . You, Molteni, are a modern man."

I did not answer this time, but put out my hand. He understood, and added: "All the same, Molteni, I shall be very sorry to do without your collaboration . . . I was already getting accustomed to you."

"Some other time, perhaps," I answered. "I should have liked to work with you, too, Rheingold."

"But why, then? Why, Molteni . . . ?"

"Fate," I said with a smile, shaking his hand. And I walked away. He remained standing beside the counter, in the bar, his arms outstretched as if to repeat: "Why?"

I hurried out of the hotel.

20

I RETURNED HOME as hurriedly as I had come; and with a feeling of impatience and of pugnacious elation which prevented me from reflecting calmly over what had happened. In fact, as I ran along the narrow ribbon of cement under the burning sun, I did not think of anything. The deadlock in an unberable situation had already lasted too long, and now I knew I had broken it; I was aware, too, that in a short time I should at last know why it was that Emilia had ceased to love me; but beyond the establishment of these facts I could not go. Reflection belongs either to the moment after, or to the moment before, the taking of action. During the time of action we are guided by reflections already past and forgotten, which have been transformed in our minds into passions. I was acting; therefore I was not thinking. I knew that I should think later, when action was over.

When I reached the villa, I ran up the stairs leading to the terrace and went into the living-room. It was empty, but a magazine lying open in an armchair, some red-stained cigarette-stumps in the ash-tray, and the sound of subdued dance-music coming from the radio indicated to me that Emilia had been there until a few moments before. And then, owing perhaps to the softened, pleasing brilliance of the afternoon light, perhaps to the discreet music, I felt my anger subsiding, though the causes which had inspired it remained firm and clear. I was struck, particularly, by the comfortable, serene, familiar, inhabited look of the room. It looked as if we had been living in the villa for months, and as if Emilia had become accustomed by now to regarding it as her settled abode. The radio, the magazine, the cigarette-stumps, all reminded me, for some reason, of her old love of home, of the pathetic yearning, wholly instinctive and feminine, that she had had for a hearth, a stable resting-place of her own. I saw that, notwithstanding all that had happened, she was preparing for a long stay, and that she was, in reality, pleased to be at Capri, in Battista's house. And now, instead, I was coming to tell her that we had to go away again.

Thoughtfully I went to the door of Emilia's room and opened it. She was not there; but here too I noticed signs of her domestic instincts—the dressing-gown carefully laid out on the armchair, at the foot of the bed, the slippers placed neatly beside it; the numerous small bottles and pots and other accessories of beauty tidily arranged on the dressing-table, in front of the mirror; on the bedside table a single book, an English grammar, the study of which she had embarked upon some time before, and with it an exercise-book, a pencil, and a small bottle; and no trace at all of the many suitcases she had brought from Rome. Almost by instinct I opened the wardrobe: Emilia's dresses—not very many of them—were hanging in a row on coat-hangers; on a shelf were arranged handkerchiefs large and small, belts, ribbons, a few pairs of shoes. Yes, I thought, it did not really matter to Emilia whether she loved me or loved Battista: what mattered more than anything was to have a house of her own, to be able to count upon a long, quiet stay, without worries of any kind.

I left the room and went along a short passage towards the kitchen, which was in a little annex at the back of the house. When I reached the threshold, I heard the voice of Emilia in conversation with the cook. I stopped, automatically, behind the open door and listened for a moment.

Emilia was giving the cook instructions for our dinner that evening, "Signor Molteni," she was saying, "likes plain cooking, without a lot of gravies and sauces—just boiled or roast, in fact. It'll be better for you, you'll have less to do, Agnesina."

"Well, Signora, there's always plenty to do. Even plain cooking isn't as plain as all that. What shall we have this evening, then?"

There was a short pause. Evidently Emilia was reflecting. Then she asked: "Would there still be any fish at this time of day?"

"Yes, if I go to the fishmonger who serves the hotels."

"Well then, buy a nice big fish—two or three pounds, or even more . . . But it must be a good quality fish, without too many bones . . . a *dentice* or, better still, a *spigola* . . . in fact, the best you can get. And I think you'd better bake it . . . or boil it. You know how to make *mayonnaise* sauce, Agnesina?"

"Yes, I do."

"All right . . . then if you boil it, make some *mayonnaise* . . . and then a salad, or some kind of cooked vegetables—carrots or *aubergines* or french beans . . . whatever you can find. And fruit, plenty of fruit. Put the fruit on the ice as soon as you get back from your shopping, so that it will be very cool when it's served."

"And what shall we do about a first course?"

"Oh yes, there's the first course too! Let's have something quite simple for this evening. Buy some ham—but be sure you get the best quality . . . and let's have some figs with it. There *are* figs to be got?"

"Yes, you can get figs."

I don't know why, but while I was listening to this domestic conversation, so quiet, so easily foreseeable, I suddenly remembered the last words I had exchanged with Rheingold. He had said that I aspired after a world like that of the *Odyssey;* and I had agreed with him; and then he had retorted that this aspiration of mine could never be satisfied, that the modern world was not the world of the *Odyssey*. And now I thought: "Yet here is a situation that might have occurred just as well thousands of years ago, in the days of Homer . . . the mistress talking to her serving-maid, giving her instructions for the evening meal." This idea recalled to my mind the lovely afternoon light, radiant but soft, which filled the living-room, and, as though by enchantment, it seemed to me that Battista's villa was the house in Ithaca, and that Emilia was Penelope, in the act of speaking to her servant. Yes, I was right; everything was, or might have been, as it was then; and yet everything was so bitterly different. With an effort, I put my head in at the door and said: "Emilia."

She scarcely turned, asking: "What is it?"

"You know . . . I want to talk to you."

"Go wait in the living-room . . . I'm not finished with Agnesina yet . . . I'll be there in a minute."

I went back into the living-room, sat down in an armchair and waited. I now had a feeling of remorse in anticipation of what I was going to do: Emilia, to all appearances, was expecting to stay a long time at the villa; and I, on the other hand, was about to announce our departure. I remembered, at this point, how she, not so many days before, had made up her mind to leave me; and, comparing her almost desperate attitude that day with her present serene bearing, I thought that after all she must have decided to live with me, even if she did despise me. In other words, she was still, at that time, rebelling against an intolerable situation, whereas now she accepted it. And yet this acceptance was far more offensive to me than any kind of rebellion; it indicated, in her, a decline, a collapse, as though now she despised not only me but herself as well. This idea sufficed to banish the slight feeling of remorse from my mind. Yes indeed, both for my sake and for hers, we had to leave, and I had to announce our departure to her.

I waited a little longer; then Emilia came in, went and turned off the radio and sat down. "You said you wanted to talk to me."

"Have you unpacked?" I asked in return.

"Yes, why?"

"I'm sorry," I said, "but you'll have to pack again. We're going back to Rome tomorrow morning."

She remained quite motionless for a moment, hesitating, as though she had not understood. Then, in a harsh voice, she asked: "What's happened now?"

"What's happened," I replied, rising from my armchair and going over to shut the door that led into the passage, "is that I've decided not to do the script. I'm throwing up the whole thing. And so we're going back to Rome."

She seemed to be really exasperated by this piece of news. Frowning, she inquired: "And why have you decided to refuse this job?"

I answered, drily: "I'm surprised that you should ask. It seems to me that, after what I saw through the window yesterday evening, I could hardly do otherwise."

She at once objected, coldly: "Yesterday evening you were of a different opinion . . . and you'd already seen."

"Yesterday evening I allowed myself to be persuaded by your arguments . . . but afterwards I saw that I ought not to take them into account. I don't know for what reason you advise me to do the script, nor do I wish to know. I only know that it's better for me, and for you too, that I shouldn't do it!"

"Does Battista know?" she asked unexpectedly.

"No, he doesn't," I replied, "but Rheingold does. I've just told him."

"You've made a very great mistake."

"Why?"

"Because," she said, in an uncertain, discontented tone of voice, "we need this money to pay the instalments on the flat. Besides, you yourself have said, over and over again, that to break a contract means cutting yourself off from other jobs. You've made a bad mistake: you shouldn't have done it."

I, in turn, became irritated. "But don't you understand, I cried, "don't you understand that my situation has become intolerable . . . that I cannot go on taking money from the man . . . from the man who is in the process of seducing my wife?"

She said nothing. I went on: "I am refusing the job because it would not be decent for me to accept it, in the present circumstances . . . but I am refusing it also for your sake, on account of you, in order that you may change your opinion about me. You—I don't know why—at present consider me a man capable of accepting a job under such conditions. Well, you're wrong. I'm not that sort of man!"

I saw a hostile, malicious light come into her eyes. "If you're doing it for your own sake, well, I don't know . . . but if you're doing it because of me, you still have time to change your mind. You would be doing a useless thing, I assure you. It would serve no purpose except to damage yourself—that would be all."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean just what I say—that it would serve no purpose."

I felt cold about the temples and knew I was turning pale. "And so—?"

"You tell me first what effect this sacrifice of yours is supposed to have on me."

I realized that the moment of final explanation had arrived. It was she herself who was offering it to me. And all of a sudden I had a feeling of fear. I began, nevertheless: "You said, some time ago, that . . . that you despised me . . . that was what you said. I don't know why you despise me. I only know that people get themselves despised when they do despicable things. Accepting this job, at the present moment, would in fact be a despicable thing . . . and so my decision will prove to you, more than anything, that I am not what you believe me to be—that's all."

She answered promptly in a tone of triumph, pleased, one would have thought, at having at last made me fall into a trap: "On the contrary, your decision won't prove anything to me . . . and that's why I advise you to go back on it."

"What do you mean, it won't prove anything?" I had sat down again and, with an almost automatic gesture, in which my distress was visibly expressed, I put out my hand and took hers as it lay on the arm of the chair. "Emilia, tell me that."

She pulled her hand away awkwardly. "Please leave all that alone . . . in fact . . . please don't touch me, don't try to touch me again. I don't love you and it will never be possible for me to love you again."

I withdrew my hand and said in a resentful voice: "Don't let's talk about our love, never mind that . . . let's talk instead about your . . . your contempt. Even if I refuse the job you'll go on despising me?"

Suddenly she jumped to her feet, as though seized by a violent impatience. "Yes, certainly I'll go on. And now let me alone."

"But why do you despise me?"

"Because I do," she cried all at once; "because you're made like that, and however hard you try, you can't change yourself."

"But how am I made?"

"I don't know how you're made—*you* ought to know. I only know you're not a man, you don't behave like a man."

I was struck by the contrast between the genuineness, the sincerity of feeling that sounded in her voice and the commonplace, sweeping nature of her words. "But what does it mean to be a *man?*" I demanded, with a rage in which irony was mingled; "don't you realize it means nothing at all?"

"Nonsense—you know perfectly well."

She had gone over to the window now, and her back was turned to me as she spoke. I clasped my head in my hands and gazed at her for a moment in despair. She had turned her back upon me not only physically but also, as it were, with the whole of her mind. She had no wish to explain herself, or perhaps, I suddenly thought, she was unable to do so. Clearly some reason for her contempt existed; but it was not so clear that she was able to indicate it precisely; and so she preferred to attribute her feeling of contempt to some original, innately despicable quality in me, a quality that was motiveless and therefore irremediable. All at once I remembered Rheingold's interpretation of the relationship between Ulysses and Penelope, and a sudden enlightenment made me wonder: "Supposing Emilia had had the impression that during these last months I knew Battista was paying court to her, that I was trying to take advantage of it, and, in fact, that instead of expostulating, I was sanctioning Battista's purposes for my own interest?" The impact of this idea left me breathless; even more so because I now recalled certain ambiguous episodes which might have confirmed her in such a suspicion; among others, my own lateness, the first evening we had gone out with Battista—due, in reality, to a taxi mishap, but which she might have attributed to a clever plan for leaving her alone with him. As if to corroborate my reflections, she suddenly said, without turning around: "A man who is really a man would not, for example, have behaved as you did yesterday evening, after seeing what you saw. But you came to me, as if butter would melt in your mouth, and asked me my opinion, pretending not to have seen anything, in the hope that I would advise you to go on with the script. And I gave you the advice you wanted and you accepted it. Then, today—goodness knows what happened with that German—you come and tell me you're giving up the job for my sake, because I despise you and you don't want me to despise you. But I know you by this time; and I can see that it's not you who've given up the job but he who made you give it up. Anyhow it's too late. I've made up my mind about you, and you can give up all the jobs in the world and I shan't change it. So don't make such a fuss about it now; accept the job and leave me in peace, once and for all."

So here we were, back at the beginning again, I could not help thinking: she despised me but refused to tell me the reason. It was deeply repugnant to me to try to formulate the reason myself, both because the reason itself would inevitably be repugnant to me, and also because, in formulating it, I should feel I was in some way accepting its validity. However I intended to get to the bottom of this question, and there was nothing else to be done. I said, as calmly as I could: "Emilia, you despise me and you won't tell me why . . . perhaps you don't even know, yourself. But I have a right to know, so that I can explain to you that it isn't true, and so that I can justify myself. Now listen: if *I* tell you the reason for your contempt, will you promise me that you'll tell me whether it's true or not?"

She was still standing in front of the window, with her back to me, and for a moment she said nothing. Then, in a tired, irritable voice, she said: "I don't promise anything . . . oh, do leave me alone!"

"The reason is this," I said very slowly, as though I were spelling it out. "You have imagined, on a basis of deceptive appearances, that I . . . that I knew about Battista, and that, for my own interest, I preferred to close my eyes—that, in fact, I actually tried to push you into his arms . . . isn't that so?"

I raised my eyes in her direction, as she stood with her back towards me, and awaited her answer. But no answer came; she was gazing at something on the other side of the window-panes, and she did not speak. All at once I felt myself blushing right up to the ears, in sudden shame at what I had said; and I saw that, as I had feared, the actual fact of my having said it could not but be interpreted by her as yet another proof of a valid foundation for her contempt. In desperation, I added hastily: "But if this is true, Emilia, I can swear to you that you're wrong. I never knew anything about Battista until yesterday evening. . . . Of course you're at liberty to believe me or not to believe me . . . but if you don't believe me, it means that you want to be able to despise me at all costs, that you want *not* to be convinced, that you want me *not* to be able to justify myself."

Once again she did not speak; and I saw I had hit the mark. Perhaps she really did not know why she despised me, and in any case preferred not to know but to continue looking upon me as a contemptible figure—just like that, without reasons, without any references to my behavior, just as one might happen to have dark hair or blue eyes. I saw also that I had not achieved the effect I desired; but, I thought, innocence does not always succeed in being convincing. Urged on by an impulse beyond control, I felt the necessity of adding a physical argument to my words. I rose and went over to her—she was still standing by the window, looking out—and seized her by the arm, saying: "Emilia, why do you hate me so? . . . Why can't you take things for granted, even for a moment?"

I noticed that she turned her face aside, as if to hide it. But she allowed me to hold her arm; and, when I came close to her, so that my side was touching hers, she did not draw back. Then I grew bolder and put my arm around her waist. At last she turned, and I saw that her whole face was wet with tears. "I shall never forgive you," she cried; "never shall I forgive you for having ruined our love. I loved you so much, and I'd never loved anyone but you . . . and I shall never love anyone else . . . and you've ruined everything because of your character. . . . We might have been so happy together . . . and instead of that, it's all quite impossible now. How can I possibly take things for granted? How can I possibly not dislike you?"

A faint hope was born in me: after all, she was saying that she had loved me, that she had never loved anyone but me. "Now listen," I suggested, seeking to draw her to me, "you go and pack now, and we'll leave tomorrow morning . . . and when we get to Rome I'll explain everything to you . . . and you'll be convinced, I'm sure of that."

This time she freed herself, almost furiously, from my grasp. "I'm not going," she cried. "What's the point of my going back to Rome? I should have to leave the flat, and, since my mother doesn't want me, I should have to go and live in a furnished room and become a typist again. No, I'm not going . . . I'm staying here . . . I need quiet and rest, and I'm staying here . . . You go, if you want to. I'm staying here.

Battista told me I could stay as long as I like . . . so I'm staying."

Now I became furious too. "You're going with me," I cried. "Tomorrow morning."

"You poor fool, you're quite wrong; I'm staying here."

"Then I shall stay here too . . . and I shall see to it that Battista turns us out of the house, both of us."

"No, you won't."

"Yes, I shall."

She looked at me for a moment; then, without saying a word, she left the room. The door of her bedroom banged violently; and then I heard the sound of the key being turned in the lock.

21

AND SO I FOUND MYSELF bound by a declaration made in a moment of anger: "I shall stay here." In truth, as I realized after Emilia had left the room, it was impossible for me to stay there any longer: the one person who had to leave was, in fact, myself. I had broken off relations with Rheingold, I had broken off relations with Battista, and now, in all probability, I had broken them off with Emilia too. I had become —to put it briefly—superfluous, and it was up to me to go. But I had cried to Emilia that I intended to stay, and, in my heart, whether as a last hope, or out of pique, I felt I wanted to stay. Such a situation in other circumstances would have been positively ridiculous, but in my desperate state of mind it was deeply distressing; it was like that of a mountaineer who, having reached a particularly dangerous point in his ascent, realizes that he can neither stay where he is, nor go backward nor forward. In a sudden access of anxiety and agitation, I started walking up and down the room, wondering what I ought to do. I knew that I could not sit down to dinner that evening with Emilia and Battista as though nothing had happened; I thought for a moment of going to dine in Capri village and not coming home till late; but I had already been four times that day over the path leading there from the house, each time at a run, each time under a burning sun, and I felt tired and had no desire to face it again. I looked at the clock: it was six. There were still at least two hours before dinner. What should I do? At last I made up my mind: I went to my own room and turned the key in the lock.

I closed the shutters and, in the dark, threw myself on the bed. I was truly tired, and, as soon as I lay down, I felt that my limbs were instinctively seeking the best positions for sleep. At that moment I was grateful to my body, which was wiser than my mind and gave, without effort, its own mute response to the painful question: "What shall I do?" After a few moments I fell into a deep sleep.

I slept for some time, dreamlessly; then I awoke and, from the complete darkness that surrounded me, judged that it must be very late. I got up from the bed, went over to the window and threw it open, and saw that night had indeed fallen. I turned on the light and looked at my watch: it was nine o'clock. I had been asleep for three hours. Dinner, I knew, was at eight, or at latest, half past eight. Again I was faced with the question: what should I do? But now I felt rested, and the question at once found its own confident, light-hearted answer: "I am in the villa, I have no reason to hide myself, I shall present myself at the dinner-table and let come what may." I even felt quite warlike and ready for a quarrel with Battista and, as I had threatened, prepared to act in such a way that he would turn Emilia and me out of the house. Quickly I tidied myself and left the room.

But the living-room was deserted, although the table was laid, in the usual corner. I noticed that it was laid for one person only. Almost immediately, to confirm my growing suspicions, the servant appeared in the doorway to tell me that Battista and Emilia had gone off to dine in the village. If I wished, I could join them at the Restaurant Bellavista.

Otherwise I could dine at home; dinner, in fact, had been ready for half an hour.

I saw that Battista and Emilia had also put the question to themselves: what is to be done? And that they had solved the problem with the greatest ease, by going away and leaving me master of the field. This time, however, I felt neither jealousy nor annoyance nor disappointment. It seemed to me, on the contrary—and not without a feeling of sadness—that they had done the only thing they could do, and that I ought to be grateful to them for having avoided an unpleasant encounter. I realized also that this tactic of absence and emptiness was intended to make me go away; and that if they continued to make use of it on the ensuing days, they would undoubtedly succeed in their purpose. But that was a matter for the still uncertain future. I told the servant to serve me, that I would dine at home; and sat down at the table.

I ate little and unwillingly, tasting no more than one slice of ham out of the many that covered the dish, and a small piece of the big fish that Emilia had ordered for the three of us. My dinner was over in a few minutes. I told the servant to go to bed, as I should not need her again. And then I went out on to the terrace.

There were some deck chairs in a corner. I unfolded one and sat down beside the balustrade, facing the dark, invisible sea.

I had promised myself, on my way back to the villa after my meeting with Rheingold, that I would reflect calmly over everything after I had talked with Emilia. At that moment I had realized that I still knew nothing about the reasons for which she had ceased to love me; but it certainly did not enter my head that, even after I had had my explanation with her, I should continue to be ignorant of them. On the contrary, I was sure—albeit without reason—that the explanation would bring about a clarification which would in some way reduce and mitigate an issue in which, hitherto, I had seen only a frightening obscurity; so that, in the end, I should be forced to exclaim: "Is that all? . . . and is it for so unimportant a reason that you refuse to love me any more?"

But, instead of this, things had turned out exactly as I had not expected them to turn out: the explanation had taken place—or at least such explanation as was possible between us two—and I knew just as much as I had known before. Worse still, I had discovered that the reason for Emilia's contempt could quite possibly be established through an examination of our past relations, yet she herself was not disposed to recognize this and wished, in her heart, to go on despising me without a reason, thus depriving me of all possibility of exculpating and justifying myself, and shutting herself off, on her side, from any possible return to esteem and love of me.

I realized, in short, that in Emilia the feeling of contempt had preceded by a long way any justifications for it, either real or imaginary, that I might have provided by my behavior. The contempt had been born out of the daily proximity of our two characters, regardless of any important, recognizable test, in the same way as the purity of a precious metal is established by contact with the touchstone. And indeed, when I had hazarded the theory that her ceasing to love me might have had its origin in a mistaken estimate, on her part, of my demeanor towards Battista, she had neither accepted nor rejected it, but had taken refuge in silence. In reality, I thought suddenly, with a stab of pain, she had considered me, from the start, to be capable of this and of even more; and all she asked was that I, by my theories, should confirm her in her feeling. In other words, in Emilia's attitude towards me there was an appraisement of my worth, an estimate of my character, quite independent of my actions. The latter, it so happened, had appeared to confirm her appraisement and her estimate; but, even without such a confirmation, she would not, in all probability have judged me differently.

And indeed the proof, if there was any need of one, lay in the mysterious strangeness of her conduct. She could, from the very beginning, have dissipated the cruel misunderstanding upon which our love had been wrecked by talking to me, by telling me of it, by opening her heart to me. But she had not done this, because—as I had cried out to her a short time before—she did not really want to be undeceived, she wanted to go on despising me.

Up till now I had been lying in the deck chair. But, in the uncontrollable agitation which these thoughts caused in me, I rose almost automatically and went and stood by the parapet with my hands resting on it. I wanted, perhaps, to calm myself by contemplating the calmness of the night. But, as I held up my burning face to catch a faint puff of air that seemed to breathe from the surface of the sea, I thought suddenly that I did not deserve such relief. And I realized that a man who is despised neither can nor ought to find peace as long as the contempt endures. He may say, like the sinners at the Last Judgment: "Mountains, fall on us, and hills, cover us"; but contempt follows him even into the remotest hiding-place, for it has entered into his spirit and he bears it about with him wherever he may go.

I went back, then, and lay down again in the deck chair, and with a trembling hand lit a cigarette. It seemed to me, however, that, whether I was despicable or not—and I was convinced that I was not—I still retained my intelligence, a quality which even Emilia recognized in me and which was my whole pride and justification. I was bound to think, whatever the object of my thought might be; it was my duty to exercise my intelligence fearlessly in the presence of any kind of mystery. If I abandoned the exercise of my intelligence, there was indeed nothing left to me but the disheartening sense of my own supposed, but unproved, despicableness.

And so I started to think again, in a manner both determined and lucid. In what could it consist, this despicableness of mine? There returned to my mind now, inescapably, the words with which Rheingold, without realizing it, had described my position in relation to Emilia, thinking, instead, to describe that of Ulysses in relation to Penelope: "Ulysses is the civilized man, Penelope the primitive woman." Rheingold, in short, after having, by his strained interpretation of the *Odyssey*, unintentionally precipitated the supreme crisis in my relations with Emilia, then consoled me—rather in the manner of Achilles' spear which first wounded and then healed—by informing me, by means of the same interpretation, that I was not despicable but "civilized." I was aware that this consolation was valid enough, if only I was willing to accept it. I was, in effect, the civilized man who, in a primitive situation—a crime in which honor is concerned—refuses to resort to the knife; the civilized man who prefers to use reason even in face of things that are sacred and considered as such. But no sooner had I shaped it in my own mind than I realized that such an explanation—an "historical" explanation, let us call it—could never satisfy me. Apart from the fact that I was not at all sure that the relationship between Emilia and me really resembled the one the film-director had imagined in the case of Ulysses and Penelope, this explanation, valid, no doubt, in the historical field, was not so in the highly intimate and individual realm of conscience, which is outside time and space. Here it is only our own interior spirit that can dictate laws. History could not justify or absolve me in the sphere proper to itself, which, in the situation in which I found myself, whatever the "historical" reasons for it may have been, was not really the spheres in which I desired to operate and to live.

Why, then, had Emilia ceased to love me? Why did she despise me? And, above all, why did she feel the need to despise me? Suddenly there came back to me the phrase she had used: "Because you're not a man," which had struck me because of its sweeping, commonplace character in contrast with the genuine, frank tone in which it had been pronounced; and it seemed to me that that phrase perhaps contained the key to Emilia's attitude towards me. There was, in fact, in that phrase, a negative indication of Emilia's own ideal image of a man who—to use her own words—*was* a man: that is to say, of what, according to her, I was not and never could be. Yet on the other hand the phrase itself, so sweeping, so slovenly in character, suggested that this ideal image had not arisen in Emilia's mind from any conscious experience of human values, but rather from the conventions of the world in which she had found herself living. In that world, a man "who was a man" was, for instance, assuredly Battista, with his animal-like force and his gross successes. That this was true had been proved to me by the looks almost of admiration that she had directed towards him at table, the day before; and by her having finally surrendered to his desires, even if only out of desperation. In fact Emilia despised me and wished to despise me because, in spite of her genuineness and simplicity, or rather just because of them, she was completely ensnared in the commonplaces of Battista's world; and among these commonplaces was the supposed inability of the poor man to be independent of the rich man, or in other words, to "be a man." I did not know for certain whether Emilia really suspected me of having, out of self-interest, favored Battista's aims; but, if this was true, she must clearly have thought along these lines: "Riccardo depends on Battista, he is paid by Battista, he hopes to get more work from Battista; Battista is paying court to me, therefore Riccardo suggests that I should become Battista's mistress."

I was astonished at not having thought of this before. It was indeed strange that I myself, who had so clearly recognized, in Rheingold's and Battista's interpretations of the *Odyssey*, their two different ways of looking at life, should not have realized that Emilia, in constructing an image of me so different from the truth, had done, fundamentally, the same thing as the producer and the director. The only difference was that Rheingold and Battista had set out to interpret the two imaginary figures of Ulysses and Penelope; whereas Emilia had applied the despicable conventions by which she was dominated to two living creatures, herself and me. Thus, from a mixture of moral straightforwardness and unconscious vulgarity there had sprung, perhaps, the idea—not accepted by Emilia, it is true, but not contradicted by her either—that I had wished to push her into the arms of Battista.

In proof of all this, I said to myself, let us imagine for a moment that Emilia has to choose between the three different interpretations of the Odyssey—Rheingold's, Battista's, and mine. She is certainly capable of understanding the commercial motives for which Battista insists upon a spectacular *Odyssey;* she can even approve Rheingold's debasing psychological conception; but, with all her naturalness and straightforwardness, she is certainly quite incapable of achieving the level of my own interpretation, or rather, that of Homer and Dante. She cannot do this, not only because she is ignorant but also because she does not live in an ideal world but rather in the perfectly real world of people like Battista and Rheingold. Thus the circle closed in. Emilia was at the same time the woman of my dreams and the woman who judged and despised me on the basis of a miserable commonplace; Penelope, faithful to her absent husband for ten long years, and the typist, suspecting self-interest where there was none. And, in order to have the Emilia I loved and to bring it about that she judged me for what I was, I should have to carry her away from the world in which she lived and introduce her into a world as simple as herself, as genuine as herself, a world in which money did not count and in which language had retained its integrity, a world—as Rheingold had pointed out to me—after which I could aspire, certainly, but which did not in fact exist.

In the meantime, however, I had to go on living, that is, moving and operating in that same world of Battista's and Rheingold's. What should I do? I felt that in the first place I ought to free myself from the painful sense of inferiority inspired in me by the absurd suspicion of my own innate and, so to speak, natural, despicableness. For, when all was said and done, this—as I have already mentioned—seemed to be the underlying idea in Emilia's attitude towards me, the idea of a baseness which was, so to speak, constitutional, and due not to behavior but to nature. Now I was convinced that no one could be said to be despicable in himself, irrespective of all outward appearance and all relationship with others. But in order to free myself from my sense of inferiority I had also to convince Emilia of this.

I recalled the threefold image of Ulysses which the *Odyssey* script had held out to me and in which I had discerned three possible modes of existence—Battista's image, Rheingold's, and finally my own, which I felt to be the only true one and which, in substance, was that of Homer. Why did Battista, Rheingold and I myself have three so very different conceptions of the figure of Ulysses? Precisely because our lives and our human ideals were different. Battista's image, superficial, vulgar, rhetorical and senseless, resembled the life and the ideals—or rather, the interests—of Battista; Rheingold's, more real, but diminished and degraded, was in accordance with the moral and artistic possibilities of Rheingold; and finally mine, without doubt the loftiest yet the most natural, the most poetical yet the most true, was derived from my aspiration, impotent perhaps but sincere, after a life that was not tainted and crippled by money or reduced to a purely physiological and material level. In a sense it was comforting to me that the image I preferred should be the best. I had to try to live up to this image, even if I had not been able to turn it to good account in the script, even if it was most improbable that I should be able to turn it to good account in life. Only in this way should I be able to convince Emilia of my reasons and so regain her esteem and her love. And how was I to accomplish this? I saw no other way than that of loving her still more, of proving to her once again, and every time it might be necessary, that my love was pure and disinterested.

I came to the conclusion, however, that for the moment it would not be a good plan to try to force Emilia. I would stay on until the next day and leave by the afternoon boat, without seeking to talk to her or to see her. Later, from Rome, I would write her a long letter, explaining all the many things I had not been able to clear up by word of mouth.

At this point in my thoughts I heard quiet voices coming, apparently, from the path below the terrace, and soon I recognized them as those of Emilia and Battista. Hurriedly I ran back into the house and went and shut myself in my room. But I was not sleepy; moreover it seemed to me it would be too painful for me to stay shut up in that stuffy room while those other two were talking and moving about the villa, all around me. Since I had been suffering from sleeplessness, especially during these last weeks, I had brought with me from Rome a very strong sleeping-medicine, very speedy in its effect. I took a double dose of it and threw myself down again—in real anger, this time—on the bed, fully dressed as I was. I must have fallen asleep almost at once, for I don't think I heard the voices of Battista and Emilia for more than a few minutes.

22

IT WAS LATE WHEN I AWOKE—judging, at least, by the rays of sunshine which penetrated into the room between the slats of the shutters—and for a moment I lay listening to the profound silence of the place, so different from silence in a town which, even when it is complete, seems always somehow to retain wounds and aches from sounds already past. Then, as I lay motionless on my back, I listened more carefully to this virgin silence, and suddenly it seemed to me that there was something lacking—not just one of those quiet sounds such as that of the electric pump drawing up water into the cistern in the morning or the servant sweeping the floor, which seem to stress the silence and make it more profound, but rather a presence. It was not a silence that was complete yet full of life, but a silence from which something vital had been withdrawn. A silence, I said to myself, finding the right word at last, a silence of abandonment. This word had barely crossed my mind before I had jumped from the bed and gone to the communicating door that led to Emilia's room. I opened it, and the first thing my eyes lit upon was a letter lying on the pillow at the head of the wide, disordered, deserted bed.

It was brief. "Dear Riccardo, Seeing that you do not want to go away, I am going myself. Perhaps I might not have had the courage to go all alone: but I am taking advantage of Battista's departure. Also because I am afraid of being left alone, and Battista's company, after all, seems preferable to solitude. But in Rome I shall leave him and go and live on my own. However, if you hear that I have become Battista's mistress, don't be surprised: I'm not made of iron, and it will mean that I haven't been able to manage it and couldn't stand it. Good-bye. Emilia."

After reading these lines, I sat down at the head of the bed with the letter in my hand and stared straight in front of me. I saw the wide-open window, and, beyond the window-sill, a few pine-trees, and, behind the trunks of the pine-trees, the wall of rock. Then I removed my eyes from the window and looked all round the room: all was in disorder, but it was an empty, blank disorder; no clothes, no shoes, no toilet articles, nothing but open, or half-open, empty drawers, gaping wardrobes with bare, dangling coat-hangers, vacant chairs. I had often thought recently that Emilia might leave me and I had thought of it as one thinks of some dreaded calamity; and now, here I was in the midst of such a calamity. I had a dull feeling of pain which seemed to start from the very depths of my being; just as an uprooted tree, if it felt pain, would feel it in the roots that held it upright in the ground. I had, in truth, been suddenly uprooted, and my roots, like those of the tree, were up in the air, and the sweet earth, Emilia, who had nourished them with her love, was far away from my roots, and those roots would never again be able to sink themselves in that love and feed upon it but would gradually dry up, and I felt that they were already drying up and it made me suffer unspeakably.

Finally I rose and went back into my room. I felt stunned and distracted, like one who has had a bad fall from a height and who feels a dull pain and knows that this pain will soon burst forth into an acute spasm, and fears this moment but does not know when it will come about. Carefully watching this hidden pain as one watches a wild beast which one fears may leap upon one at any moment and tear one to pieces, I automatically took my bathing costume, went out of the house, walked along the path that runs round the island and reached the village piazza. There I bought a newspaper, sat down in one of the cafés, and, almost to my own surprise, since it seemed to me that in my situation I would not have been able to think of anything except the situation itself, I read the whole newspaper through, from the first to the last line. In the same sort of way, I reflected, a fly whose head has been torn off by some cruel child seems, for a time, to feel no effect from the mutilation but walks about or cleans its feet until suddenly it collapses and dies. At last midday struck, and the clock in the campanile filled the square with the din of its chimes. A bus was on the point of leaving for the Piccola Marina, and I got into it.

Shortly afterwards I was in the open, sun-filled space where, amid a sharp smell of urine, stood the little carriages with their horses, while their drivers sat together in a group, quietly chatting. I went off with a light step down the stairs leading to the beach-houses, and looked down from above upon the short stretch of white shingly beach and the sea lying blue beneath the tranquil sky. Utterly calm was the sea, smooth and glossy as satin right to the horizon, with great, diaphanous current-tracks winding idly over its surface in the dazzling sunlight. I thought it would be good to go out in a boat that afternoon; rowing would be a distraction, and then I should be completely alone, which, on the already frequented beach, would be impossible. When I reached the beach-houses, I called the attendant and asked him to get a boat ready for me. Then I went into one of the houses to undress.

When I came out, I walked barefoot along the little terrace in front of the houses, lokoing down and taking care not to hurt myself on the roughness of the warped, salt-worn planks. The June sun blazed overhead, enveloping me in its strong light, burning my back. It gave me a sensation of well-being which was in bitter contrast with my mental state of stunned suspense. My eyes still lowered, I went down the steep steps and walked towards the edge of the beach over the scorching stones. It was only when I was a short distance from the edge that I raised my eyes; and then I saw Emilia.

The attendant, a thin, vigorous old man, brown as leather, with a big straw hat pulled down over his eyes, was standing beside the boat which he had already pushed half into the water; Emilia was sitting in the stern, wearing a two-piece costume that I knew well, of a rather faded green. She was sitting with her legs pressed closely together, her arms stretched backwards to support herself, her bare, slender waist slightly twisted in relation to her hips, in an attitude that was insecure yet full of feminine grace. Aware of my surprise, she was smiling and looking straight into my eyes, as much as to say: "I'm here . . . but don't say anything . . . Pretend you knew I was here."

I obeyed this unspoken advice and, in silence, more dead than alive, deeply troubled, my heart in a tumult, mechanically took the hand which the attendant held out to me and jumped into the boat. The attendant came into the water up to his knees, slipped the oars into the oarlocks and pushed the boat off. I sat down, took hold of the oars and started rowing with my head down, in the burning sun, towards the promontory that enclosed the little bay. I rowed with energy and in about ten minutes reached the promontory, still in silence and still without looking at Emilia. I felt a kind of restraint at the thought of talking to her as long as the beach, with its huts and its bathers, was still in sight. I wanted solitude around myself and her, as I had wanted it in the villa, as I always wanted it when I wished to say certain things to her.

But, as I rowed, I became aware that, in a sudden overflowing of bitterness mingled with a new, strange joy, tears had started flowing from my eyes. I rowed on and felt my eyes burning with tears and my face burning each time one of these tears detached itself from my eyes and slid down my cheek. When I was opposite the end of the promontory, I rowed more strongly so as to make headway against the current, which at that point made the water rough and boisterous. On my right was a small black rock with a jagged crest sticking up out of the water, on my left the high, rocky wall of the promontory; I thrust the bow of the boat into this passage, rowed vigorously through the swirling water and thus passed the end of the point. The rock, where it plunged into the sea, was white with salt, and each time the water ebbed one could see green beards of seaweed, brilliant in the sun, and here and there a red fruit like a sea tomato. Beyond the promontory appeared a huge amphitheater of fallen rock, backed by the perpendicular mountain wall, and here and there, between one mass of rock and the next, little beaches of white shingle, completely deserted. The sea, too, was deserted, with neither boats nor bathers; and the water, in this inlet, was of a thick, oily blue that appeared to indicate great depth. Farther off, other promontories were outlined one behind the other upon the flat, sun-filled sea, like the wings of some fantastic natural theater.

I slowed down at last and lifted my face towards Emilia. And as though she too had been waiting to speak until we had rounded the promontory, she smiled at me and asked in a gentle voice: “Why are you crying?”

“I’m crying for joy at seeing you,” I replied.

“You’re glad to see me?”

"Very, very glad . . . I was sure you had gone away . . . but after all you haven't!"

She lowered her eyes and said: "I had made up my mind to go away . . . and I went down to the harbor this morning with Battista. . . Then at the last moment I thought better of it and stayed."

"And what have you been doing all this time?"

"I wandered about down by the harbor . . . I sat in a café . . . Then I went up to the village in the funicular and telephoned to the villa . . . I was told you had gone out . . . Then I thought perhaps you'd gone to the Piccola Marina, so I came here . . . I undressed and waited for you . . . I saw you asking the attendant to get you a boat . . . I was lying in the sun and you passed quite close to me without seeing me . . . Then, while you were undressing, I got into the boat."

For some moments I said nothing. We were now halfway between the promontory we had passed and another point which enclosed the inlet. Beyond that point, I knew, was the Green Grotto, in which, in the first place, it had been my intention to bathe. Finally I asked, in a low voice: "Why didn't you go away with Battista, as you had decided? Why did you stay?"

"Because this morning, on thinking it over, I saw I had been mistaken about you . . . and that the whole thing had been a misunderstanding."

"What was it made you see that?"

"I don't quite know . . . lots of things . . . chiefly, perhaps, the tone of your voice, yesterday evening."

"And are you really convinced now that I've never done all those dreadful things you accused me of?"

"Yes, I *am* convinced."

There still, however, remained one thing that I had to know, perhaps the most important of all. "But you," I said, "you don't think I'm a despicable person do you? . . . even though I haven't done those things . . . despicable because made of despicable stuff . . . Tell me, you don't believe that, Emilia?"

"I've never believed it . . . I thought you'd behaved in a certain way, and that's why you lost my esteem . . . But now I know that it's all been a misunderstanding . . . Let's not talk about it any more, if you don't mind."

This time I said nothing, and she was silent too, and I started rowing with greater energy, with an energy that was now redoubled, it seemed to me, by a feeling of joy which gradually, like a rising sun, grew and mounted within me, warming my spirit which till then had been aching and numb. Meanwhile we had reached a point opposite the Green Grotto, and I steered the boat towards the cave, already visible, and appearing to hang, dark and crooked, above an expanse of cold green water. "And you do love me?" I went on.

She hesitated and then answered: "I've always loved you . . . I always shall love you"; but she said it with a kind of sadness that surprised me. "Why," I insisted in alarm, "why do you say that in such a sad way?"

"I don't know . . . perhaps because it would have been better if no misunderstanding had ever come between us and we had always loved one another as we did in the past."

"Yes," I said, "but all that's over now . . . We mustn't think about it any more . . . Now we're going to love each other forever." She appeared to nod her head, but without raising her eyes, and still rather sadly. I stopped rowing for a moment, and, leaning forward, added "We'll go to the Red Grotto now . . . It's a smaller cave and very deep, beyond the Green Grotto . . . There's a little beach at the end of it, in the dark . . . We'll make love there, shall we, Emilia?"

I saw her lift her head and nod her assent, in silence, gazing fixedly at me, with a look of discreet, and even rather bashful, complicity. I started rowing again energetically. We entered the grotto, beneath the great vault of rugged rock upon whose surface water and sunlight threw gay reflections, casting upon it a close net of quivering emerald. Farther on, at the place where the sea penetrated only at intervals, making the vault resound with hollow reverberations, the water was dark, with a few smooth, black rocks emerging from it like the backs of amphibious beasts. Here was the tortuous opening, a narrow passage between two rocks, that led through to the Red Grotto. Emilia was sitting quite still now, looking at me and following each one of my movements with her eyes, in an attitude of sensual but patient docility, like a woman who is ready to give herself and is only awaiting the signal. By thrusting, first with one oar then with other, against the walls of the channel, beneath the stalactite-hung vault, I brought the boat through into the open and then steered it towards the dark mouth of the Red Grotto. "Look out for your head," I said to Emilia; and then, with one stroke of the oars, I propelled the boat over the smooth water into the cave.

The Red Grotto is divided into two parts. The first, like an entrance hall, is separated from the second by a lowering of the vault overhead; beyond this point the cave bends sharply and runs a considerable distance back to the beach at its farthest end. This second part is plunged in almost complete darkness, and one's eyes have to become accustomed to the gloom before one can discern the little subterranean beach, which is strangely colored by the reddish light that gives its name to the grotto. "It's very dark inside the cave," I went on to say, "but we'll be able to see as soon as our eyes get used to it." In the meantime, carried along by the force of my initial stroke, the boat slid along in the darkness, under the low vault of rock; and I saw nothing more. At last I heard the bow strike the beach, thrusting into the gravel with a moist, resonant sound. Then I let go of the oars and, half rising, put out by hand towards the point in the darkness where the stern of the boat should be, saying: "Give me your hand and I'll help you to get out."

No answer came to me. I repeated, in surprise: "Give me your hand, Emilia!" and for the second time leaned forward, holding out my hand. Then, since there was again no reply, I leaned still farther forward and, cautiously, so as not to strike the face of Emilia, I felt about for her in the darkness. But my hand met nothing but empty air, and when I lowered it I felt beneath my fingers, at the spot where they should have encountered Emilia's seated figure, nothing but the smooth wood of the empty seat. My astonishment was mingled with a feeling of terror. "Emilia!" I cried, "Emilia!" The only answer was a thin, icy echo. In the meantime my eyes had become accustomed to the darkness and could at last distinguish, in the thick gloom, the boat with its bow lying on the beach, the beach itself, of fine, black gravel, and the glimmering, dripping vault curving over my head. And then I saw that the boat was completely empty, with no one sitting in the stern, and that the beach was empty too, and that all round me there was no one, and that I was alone.

Looking towards the stern, I said, in astonishment: "Emilia!" but this time it was in a low voice. And I repeated again: "Emilia, where are you?"—and at that same moment I understood. Then I got out of the boat and threw myself down on the beach and buried my face in the moist pebbles and I think I fainted, for I remained motionless, almost without feeling, for a time that seemed endless.

Later I rose to my feet, automatically got into the boat again and pushed it out of the cave. At the mouth of the grotto the strong sunlight, reflected off the sea, smote me. I looked at the watch on my wrist and saw that it was two o'clock in the afternoon. I had been the cave for more than an hour. And I remembered that noon was the hour for ghosts; and I realized that I had been talking and weeping in the presence of a ghost!

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My return to the beach-houses was slow; every now and then I stopped rowing and sat still, resting on my oars, my eyes fixed dreamily upon the blue, shining surface of the sea. It was clear that I had had a hallucination, of the same kind as I had had two days before, when Emilia was lying naked in the sun and I had imagined that I had bent over her and kissed her, whereas in reality I had not moved nor gone near her. This time the hallucination had been far more precise and articulate; but that it was in truth a hallucination and nothing more no further proof was needed than the conversation I had imagined myself to have had with Emilia's ghost—a conversation during which I had made Emilia say all the things I wanted her to say, and assume exactly the attitudes I wished her to assume. Everything had begun and ended with myself; the only difference from what usually happens in such circumstances being that I had not confined myself to a wishful imagining of what I wanted to happen, but, from the sheer force of feeling that filled my heart, had deluded myself into thinking it really had happened. Strange to say, however, I was not in the least surprised at having had a hallucination of a kind that was not merely uncommon but perhaps unique. As though the hallucination were still continuing, I turned my attention, not so much to the question of its actual possibility, as to its details, reconstructing them one by one, dwelling with an almost sensual pleasure upon those which gave me most pleasure and comfort. How beautiful Emilia had been, sitting in the stern of my boat, no longer hostile but full of love; how sweet her words; how disturbing, how violent the feeling I had experienced when I told her I wanted to make love to her and she had answered me with that faint nod of agreement! Like one who has had a voluptuous and very vivid dream and who, on awakening, lingers with relish over all its aspects and sensations, I was, in reality, still caught up in my hallucinations, believing in it and joyfully reliving it in my memory; and little did it matter to me that it was a hallucination, seeing that I was experiencing all the feelings with which one usually remembers a thing that has really happened.

As I dwelt with inexhaustible pleasure upon the details of my vision, it suddenly occurred to be to compare once again the time at which I had left the Piccola Marina in the boat with the time at which I had come out of the Red Grotto, and I was again struck with the great length of time that I must have spent at the far end of the cave, on the little subterranean beach: allowing three quarters of an hour for the journey from the Piccola Marina to the Grotto, it must have been more than an hour. As I have already said, I had attributed this length of time to a fainting fit, or at any rate to some kind of collapse or unconsciousness very like a fainting fit. But now, on re-examining my hallucinations, which had been so complete and at the same time had corresponded so obligingly with my most profound desires, I wondered whether I had not quite simply dreamed the whole thing. Whether, that is to say, I had not embarked from the bathing-beach alone and without any ghost on board, and whether I had not penetrated, still alone, into the grotto, and finally lain down on the little beach and gone to sleep.

During my sleep—if this were so—I had dreamed that I had started off in the boat with Emilia sitting in the stern, that I had talked to her and she had answered me, that I had suggested making love, that we had gone together into the cave. And then I had also dreamed that I had put out my hand to help her out of the boat, that I had failed to find her, that I had been frightened, that I had thought I must have had a ghost with me on my boat excursion, and that I had finally thrown myself down on the beach and fainted.

This supposition now seemed to me to be probably true; but not more than probably. Now that it had been obscured, sidetracked and confused by my subsequent fancies, it seemed to me almost impossible to search out the dividing line between dream and actual reality, a dividing line that must be located in that moment when I lay down on the beach. What had really happened at the precise moment when I lay down on the little beach at the far end of the cave? Had I fallen asleep and dreamed that I had been with Emilia, the real Emilia of flesh and blood? Or had I fallen asleep and dreamed that I had been visited by Emilia's ghost? Or again, had I fallen asleep and dreamed that I was asleep and dreaming one or the other of the aforesaid dreams? Like those Chinese boxes each one of which contains a smaller one, reality seemed to contain a dream which in its turn contained a reality which in its turn contained yet another dream, and so on *ad infinitum.* Thus, again and again, pausing and resting on my oars out at sea, I wondered if I had dreamed or had had a hallucination, or—more singularly—if a ghost had indeed appeared to me; and in the end I came to the conclusion that it was not possible for me to find out, and that, in all probability, I should never find out.

I rowed on and came at last to the beach-house. I dressed in great haste, went up again to the road, and was in time to board a bus which was on the point of leaving for the piazza. I was in a great hurry now to be home again: somehow, for a reason I could not explain, I felt convinced that when I reached the villa I should perhaps find the key to all these mysteries. I was in a hurry to get there also because I had still to have lunch and pack my bag and then catch the six o'clock boat; and I had wasted time. I left the piazza at once, almost at a run, by the usual path; in twenty minutes' time I was at the villa.

I had no time, as I entered the deserted living-room, to succumb to the sadness of desolation and loneliness. On the already laid table, beside the plate, was a telegram. Unsuspecting but vaguely troubled, I took the yellow envelope and opened it. Battista's name surprised me and, for some reason, seemed to give me a hope of favorable news. But then I read the text: it announced to me, in a few words, that, as the result of a serious accident, Emilia was "dangerously ill."

I realize, at this point, that I have almost nothing more to say. It is useless to describe how I left that same afternoon, how, when I reached Naples, I learned that in reality Emilia had been killed in a motor accident a short distance south of Terracina. Her death had been a strange one. Owing to fatigue and the great heat, she had apparently fallen asleep, with her head down and her chin resting on her chest. Battista, as usual, was driving extremely fast. Suddenly an ox-drawn cart had come out of a side road. Battista had jammed on the brakes; and, after an exchange of abuse with the driver of the cart, had driven on. But Emilia's head was swaying from one side to another, and she had not spoken. Battista had spoken to her, but she had not answered; and, at a bend in the road, she had fallen on top of him. He had stopped the car, and had then discovered that she was dead. The sudden jamming on of the brakes to avoid the cart had caught her body in a moment of complete abandonment, with all the muscles relaxed, as indeed happens during sleep;

and the jolt of the suddenly stopped car had caused an abrupt jerk of the neck, fracturing the spinal column outright. She had died without knowing it.

It was extremely hot—a wearisome thing for sorrow, which demands, like joy, that there should be no rivalry in any other feeling. The funeral took place on a day of unrelieved sultriness, beneath a cloudy sky, the air damp and windless. After the funeral, in the evening, I closed the door behind me as I entered our apartment—for ever useless and empty, now—and I understood at last that Emilia, truly, was dead, and that I should never see her again. All the windows in the flat had been opened wide in the hope of increasing even the faintest breath of air, but I felt I was suffocating as I wandered from one room to another, over the polished floors, in the twilight gloom. Meanwhile the brightly lit windows of the adjoining houses, their inhabitants visible inside the rooms, drove me almost to frenzy, their quiet lights reminding me of a world in which people loved without misunderstandings and were loved in return and lived peaceful lives —a world from which it seemed to me that I was for ever shut out. The re-entry into such a world would have meant, for me, an explanation with Emilia, her conviction of my innocence, the creation once again of the miracle of love which, in order to exist, must be kindled not only in our own hearts but in those of others as well. But this was no longer possible, and I felt I should go mad when I thought that perhaps I ought to recognize, in Emilia's death, a last, supreme act of hostility on her part against myself.

But I had to go on living. Next day I took up the suitcase which I had not yet opened, locked the door of the flat with the sensation of closing a grave, and handed the keys to the porter, explaining that I intended to get rid of the apartment as soon as I returned from my holiday. Then I started off again for Capri. Strange to say, I was driven to return there by the hope that, somehow or other, in the same place where she had appeared to me, or elsewhere, Emilia would again show herself to me. And then I would again explain to her why everything had happened, and I would again declare my love, and would again receive her assurance that she understood me and loved me. This hope had a quality of madness about it, and I was aware of this. Never, indeed, was I so near to a kind of reasoned insanity as I was at that time, balanced precariously between a loathing for reality and a longing for hallucination.

Emilia, fortunately, did not reappear to me, either when sleeping or waking. And when I compared the time at which she had appeared with the time at which she had died, I discovered that they did not correspond. Emilia had been still alive at the moment when I thought I had seen her sitting in the stern of the boat; but she was, in all probability, already dead during the time of my unconsciousness on the little beach at the far end of the Red Grotto. So, in death as in life, there was no true conformity. And I should never know whether she had been a ghost or a hallucination, or a dream, or perhaps some other illusion. The ambiguity which had poisoned our relationship in life continued even after her death.

Driven on by longing for her and for places where I had last seen her, I made my way one day to the beach below the villa, where I had come upon her lying naked and had had the illusion that I had kissed her. The beach was deserted; and as I came out through the masses of fallen rock with my eyes raised towards the smiling, blue expanse of the sea, the thought of the *Odyssey* came back into my mind, and of Ulysses and Penelope, and I said to myself that Emilia was now, like Ulysses and Penelope, in those great sea spaces, and was fixed for eternity in the shape in which she had been clothed in life. It depended upon myself, not upon any dream or hallucination to find her again and to continue our earthly conversation with renewed serenity. Only in that way would she be delivered from me, would she be set free from my feelings, would she bend down over me like an image of consolation and beauty. And I decided to write down these memories, in the hope of succeeding in my intention.